

## The Light You Make by kittenCorrosion

**Series:** [The Light You Make \(AU\) \[1\]](#)

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Angst, College AU, Emotional Baggage, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, F/M, Happy Ending, Mentions of Suicide, Modern Day, Slight Age Difference, Slow Burn, all consensual, be careful i don't want to trigger anyone, i swear it'll end happily it's just gonna take a while to get there, it's about real things and real life so take it with a grain of salt, it's like kind of cute but also a little dark because real life is like that, mentions of cutting, no supernatural, nothing too painfully graphic but it's there so here's your warning, she's a freshmen he's a junior just for fun, she's got a lot of emotional things, some sexual content, trigger warnings for chapters

**Language:** English

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**Summary:**

She'd never wanted to go on a blind date less in her entire life, but Max's big blue eyes were pleading and with a sigh she relented.

"Fine, but he better not be a huge nerd."

~

It's impossible to know where and when you'll find love. But sometimes it's not about finding it—it's about learning to accept it.

[currently in the process of being reedited/cleaned up: 12/22 complete]

# 1. Talk some sense to me

## Notes for the Chapter:

hey so it's been a while.

i went on hiatus because i started my last semester of college before i graduate and i wanted to acclimate. i'll sort of be back.

i'm on indefinite hiatus on Miles from Nowhere because like... i've put too much pressure on myself writing it and i'm not happy with it. so i'm gonna wait a bit until i want to write it again. sorry if that's disappointing.

but while i was away i wrote this. it's about halfway done and i'm still working on it. i don't really know what it is or where it's going but i want to finish something so this is me doing that. sorry to just abandon you all. i really appreciate each and every one of you.

this fic was inspired by: scott pilgrim (the novels), my own college/high school experience, jessica jones and trish walker, dee (lovelysarcastic), lovebug by the jonas brothers, and i found by amber run.

also by this picture: <http://fav.me/dbaj12x> which is definitely mike's outfit in this chapter. i saw this amazing art by verauko several months ago on instagram (i think it was insta) and had been headcanoning it subconsciously but now i have a sOURCE WOO HOO. definite inspiration for their grown up looks so you should check it out!

sorry again for just dropping but i had to take a break.

College was hard enough without your roommate pestering you about boys. There were twelve page research papers and hour long

exams and pop quizzes and notebooks full of notes to memorize. Eleven was already struggling to adjust without the stress of her best friend constantly pestering her, trying to get her to notice various, unassuming boys in the crowds around them.

“Ooh, what about him? He’s got nice arms.”

Max pointed rather conspicuously at a buff, blonde guy further up the line they were standing in, where they were holding their baskets of overpriced textbooks as they waited to checkout at the front of the campus bookstore. Eleven didn’t even bother looking where Max was pointing, too busy poring through her Abnormal Psychology book and dog-eared pages that sounded interesting. And it was probably a no anyways. She had to meet a guy on campus who managed to keep her interest for more than twenty seconds—not counting professors of course.

“Why does it matter if he has nice arms?” she asked, clearly bored but trying to humor her friend.

“So he can carry your heavyass backpack,” Max rolled her eyes, “Duh!”

“I can carry my own backpack just fine, thanks.”

“Obviously,” Max scoffed, “but that doesn’t mean you *have* to. It’s not about being dependent on someone it’s about letting them do it because they want to... and then you don’t have to do it.”

They moved up a few inches in line, ending up next to a display of highlighters which Eleven looked at contemplatively before grabbing a pink one. They were pastel colored, less harsh on the eyes, and erasable too. She couldn’t resist and grabbed three more in her favorite color, still not really paying attention to her best friend but asking a question that was semi-relevant.

“Do you really make Dustin carry your stuff for you?”

Max grimaced like she was embarrassed, but quickly brushed it off. “No, not yet—but if I have to lug this stupid Organic Chemistry book around every day I’m probably going to,” she shifted the basket in

her hand. “Why do they have to be expensive *and* heavy? Can’t they be one or the other? God, and then we have to buy new ones every semester, like once a year isn’t enough?!”

Eleven didn’t bother answering, knowing there wasn’t any real answer that didn’t delve into the problematic education system, and knowing Max would rant and rave about it until she felt satisfied that her complaints had been heard by the universe.

Eleven knew Max. They’d been best friends since middle school, almost half of their lives. One of the mean girls in their fifth grade class had made fun the new girl—Max, of course—trying to talk about gingers being soulless freaks, and Eleven had punched her lights out. It took the entirety of the two months of detention together—Max had insisted to the principal that it had been her fault too—but the redhead was loyal and persistent and El discovered that maybe her anger at the world didn’t have to include the new girl who wanted to be her friend. After that they were inseparable, even as their personalities switched through the years, Eleven mellowing her violent ways and Max morphing into the outgoing, shining star, they’d remained each other’s favorite person.

Though at the moment she wasn’t sure if Max could be her favorite anything.

“Eleven, look!” It was a gasp of excitement. “That guy has glasses *and* huge arms. A bodybuilding nerd—your dream man!”

Max was pointing again and Eleven huffed and slapped her laughing friend’s hand out of the air.

“Can you not point? It’s rude, people are looking,” she snapped, “and I’ve told you, I don’t like nerds. That’s *your* thing! You’re dating Dustin Henderson, king of the nerds?”

To be fair, that relationship had surprised both of them. Max had met Dustin in their oil painting class first semester, where they had bonded over being terrible and failed the class together. Ironically both had only taken the class because of their friends—Max with Eleven and Dustin with his roommate, Will. Eleven had been pretty okay at it, her still life coherent enough to get her a passing grade,

but Will was clearly talented. Why an Art Education major would want to take a general education class was unclear, but he never boasted as others oohed and aahed over his canvas.

Dustin was truly the nerdiest person Eleven had ever met, but also one of the friendliest. He had a terribly thick lisp—the result of a medical condition he'd been born with—which added to his charm, and bright shining eyes that danced at every terrible joke he told. His hobbies included video games, computer programming, reading Star Wars fanfiction, computer games, marathoning Star Wars movies, and playing Dungeons and Dragons, the last of which Eleven found oddly retro.

“Yeah, well, he’s a cute nerd at least. And his breath doesn’t stink like every dude who’s tried to make out with me—” Max suddenly paused, like she was remembering something, licking her lips and then continuing on casually. “Oh, you’re coming with me tonight, by the way. We’re going mini golfing at the FunPlex and he’s bringing his roommate.”

“Will agreed to go mini golfing?” Eleven was surprised. Will had once told her he hated mini golf specifically after his dad had taken him as a child.

“Oh, no not Will, his new roommate.”

Eleven frowned, feeling suddenly disappointed. “He got a new one? What about Will?”

She had liked Will. He was quiet and didn’t mind that she was too, never forcing her to converse or open up to him but always being to talk if she was in the mood. So when Max dragged her over to the boys' dorm room on weekends—citing she wouldn’t leave Eleven alone to study all night and “be boring”—she could sneak a book over and study anyways without him saying anything or being offended she didn’t want to hang out. Sometimes he would even help her with her homework while Max and Dustin played video games on the bottom bunk.

He was also gay, which meant Max wasn’t constantly pressuring Eleven into dating him like every other male acquaintance they had

made so far. She *really* liked Will.

“Oh, Dustin has like three friends from his hometown here. Will is one of them. They switch out every semester so they can all like... hang out or whatever, take turns,” Max shrugged. “I think you met Lucas once, he stopped by that one time we went over to get help with Statistics?”

Dustin was nerdy also in the sense that he was super smart, Will too. Any time Eleven or Max had questions and they couldn't get to their professor, the two boys always seemed to know the answer. They had taken most of the classes anyways, since they were two years older, in their third year, juniors, while Max and Eleven had just finished their first semester. Eleven vaguely remembered someone named Lucas sticking his head in and being surprised to see girls, making some disparaging comment Eleven hadn't cared for and had pointedly ignored.

“Right... wasn't he—”

“Black? Yeah,” Max nodded and Eleven flushed, annoyed.

“I was going to say *tall*, but okay.”

“Oh, you think he was tall?” She snorted. “You need to meet Mike. He's like... a giraffe.”

“Wait, who?” Eleven couldn't remember anyone by that name.

“The fourth one, Dustin's new roommate,” Max tried to casually shrug, but a smirk played at her lips. “The one we're going mini golfing with tonight.”

Eleven was surprised she hadn't already met him, considering how much time she spent studying on the top bunk in Dustin and Will's room. But it's not exactly like listening to Max and her boyfriend make out half the time was that fun, she supposed she and Will and had only been subjected to it since they were the roommates who couldn't escape. She couldn't blame the other two for avoiding the room. And she'd only met Lucas once during the entire semester... why would have met the other one?

They were getting nearer to the register but Eleven was glaring at Max through narrowed eyes, adjusting her basket of books, reading what her roommate wasn't saying out loud. God, she hoped she was wrong.

"But it's not a double date, right?" Max said nothing and Eleven pressed further. "*Right?*"

"Um, well—"

El barked in exasperation, almost throwing her basket. "Max! What have I told you about setting me up on dates without asking me?!"

"Dustin asked if I could set up his friend with someone and I didn't want to let him down," she actually looked a bit remorseful. "Look, it's going to be casual, you don't have to wear a dress or anything—even though I know you have that cute pink one—and Mike isn't some total weirdo—"

"I'm not going," Eleven said flatly.

Max's eyes widened, pleading with her friend. "Just this once, Ellie, please? I promise to never do it again but Dustin asked because his Mike has been all moody or something lately, I don't know, I just wanted to help out and it sounded fun—"

"And *I'm* the perfect candidate to make this random dude less moody?" She huffed.

"Well, um, maybe. You're just the only I could think of—"

"Because I'm your only friend?"

Max frowned, looking a little offended.

"No... but—please, Eleven? I won't do it again... and I'll owe you big time, okay? I don't want to let Dustin down."

"Max..." Eleven protested, feeling her resolve starting to give out.

She'd never wanted to go on a blind date less in her entire life, but Max's big blue eyes were pleading and with a sigh she relented.



“Fine, but he better not be a huge nerd.”

The conversation was interrupted as the cashier appeared in front of her and she handed over her basket, reaching for her wallet as she silently fumed. She loved her best friend and knew she had good intentions but at the same time Eleven knew she didn't want a relationship. She didn't want to date or go on dates or even pretend she was interested in any of it. She didn't have time for that, or the energy, and if Papa found out she was... fraternizing with someone unapproved by him, she'd be sent home before she graduated.

And she had to graduate. She had to get a job, make enough money to be independent. So she could live in her own place with her own furniture and clothing. Start living her own life. She couldn't go back to the smothering presence and the disappointment and the frigid anger.

Failing wasn't an option. And being distracted by some guy she probably would scare away anyways wasn't an option either.

The cashier finished ringing up her books and Eleven tried not to grimace at the price. Max was right about one thing; textbooks were ridiculously expensive. Pulling the shiny, black AmEx card from her wallet, she grimaced again, hating that she had to rely on *his* money. Her name was on the card, but it was connected to his bank account, which he closely monitored to make sure she wasn't spending money on non-essentials. Like she would do that and let herself owe him anything more than necessary.

She quickly scribbled her signature, *Jane Brenner*, on the dotted line and scooted the receipt back to the cashier before grabbing her bag and moving to the side so Max could take her turn. Something caught her eye and she tilted her head, trying to get a better view.

There were a couple of comfy armchairs near the front of the bookstore and she spied an empty one, quickly abandoning Max and making a beeline for it, wanting to rest her tired feet while her friend finished her sale—which would take a while since Max paid for everything in exact cash. They'd been standing in line for a good thirty minutes and Eleven's back and feet ached from holding her heavy books for so long. Maybe Max had a point about making a guy

carry her backpack for her—

“Oof!”

She'd lost her train of thought just long enough to zone out and run smack into the back of someone. A tall someone. A someone who was definitely a guy, and who was about to turn around sit down in *her* chair. She scowled at him as he turned to see who had run into him, surprise creasing his nicely define brows into squiggles.

“Oh,” he flushed a rather pretty shade of red as he took her in, glaring up at him, “Sorry I didn’t see—”

“That’s my chair,” she cut him off, not caring for his apology.

He blinked his ebony eyes in surprise, then looked down at the armchair and back at her again. His black hair was shaggy, flopping into his eyes a bit as he assessed the situation, the embarrassment fading a bit.

“I mean... I don’t see your name on it,” he challenged, lips quirking into an amused smile.

He was tall, *really* tall, and Eleven had to crane her neck up to look him in his pretty, freckled face—immediately berating herself for thinking that he was *pretty*. She was on the shorter side, barely 5’3, and this guy was at least a foot taller. He was wearing a green sweater over a striped yellow button up and light-wash blue jeans that were a little too short for his ridiculously long legs. She furrowed her brows and shot him an annoyed look but didn’t reply, instead reaching down into her bag of new school supplies, deciding to act instead of speak. Grabbing a fresh pack of sticky notes and purple pen, she scribbled her name, *Eleven*, across one of them, pulled it off the stack and then reached around him to smack it squarely into the middle of the cushion of the armchair.

“How about now?” She raised an eyebrow, daring him to challenge her.

His mouth hung open slightly, clearly in shock at her witty response to his teasing. She quickly pushed past him, feeling him move easily

to the side, their arms brushing, and plopped down into the chair, almost groaning in relief at the immediate comfort. She had worn combat boots that had a heel and it had been a huge mistake. Propping her feet up on the table in front of her, she sank in further with a content sigh, already forgetting the encounter, finally opening her eyes.

The tall guy was still staring at her, blinking, and she inwardly smirked at his speechless reaction. Good. She liked it when they didn't know how to react... that was the whole point, to make them go away. But instead of walking away in a huff, he opened his mouth again, asking a question she didn't really expect.

"Your name is *Eleven*? What..." he blinked as she scowled again, her temper flaring.

"It's a nickname," she said gruffly.

"How do you get a nickname like Eleven? Did you do something when you were eleven or—"

"By being the eleventh kid your guardian decides to adopt," she blurted.

It was immediately awkward, but she'd made it so on purpose, wanting to shut up him and make him feel bad for being nosy. It was her usual tactic for when people asked too much; she would tell them exactly what they were trying figure out and usually they realized they would have preferred not to know.

But he looked so... stricken. And apologetic. She felt a little bad for snapping. He hadn't been a total dick after all, he'd let her take the chair even though he had technically been there first and he wasn't trying to hit on her which was kind of a shame.

*No, it's not*, she shook her head. But she took pity on him anyways.

"That's what I like to be called," she looked away with a shrug, not knowing why she was still talking to him. "Don't worry about it."

He immediately tried to apologize. "No, I'm sorry, I was just curious —"

"Well then don't be." She cut him off, ready to end the awkward interaction that was making her heart all jumpy and her face flushed. What was it about this guy that was making her... nervous? Remorseful? Eleven wasn't sure which was worse.

She looked down at the books in her bag, grabbing one and opening it. After a moment she glanced up again, surprised to see he was still standing in front of her, looking contemplative. Her heart fluttered again, against her will, as he gazed down at her, teeth working at his full bottom lip as he thought.

"What?" It came out harsher than she meant it to.

"Um, sorry..." He flushed again, fingers fiddling with a pin on his messenger bag. "I just thought... I mean, like what bout El? Short for Eleven? Like a nickname for your nickname."

"El?" Her heart rate doubled it's already pounding pace, voice pitching up in surprise.

"Yeah," he flushed scarlet, looking full of sudden regret, taking her tone for outrage. "S-Sorry, that's stupid. Um, I'll leave you alone forever now."

He whirled around, clearly embarrassed, but Eleven felt herself speaking, not entirely sure what was possessing her. "No, wait—"

He almost tripped over his own feet as he stopped abruptly and turned back to face her, eyebrows raised. She felt as surprised as he looked, but something about his need to make her feel more comfortable by giving her a surprisingly charming nickname made her feel... warm? That was definitely an unexpected feeling. More unexpected than the remorse.

"It's not stupid," she blurted. "Um, I kind of like it."

They stared at each other and Eleven felt her face heat up, suddenly intensely uncomfortable. Had she really just said that *out loud*? To this random guy who was looking at her with the warmest eyes she'd ever seen? This was the weirdest day.

He opened his mouth to say something but Eleven saw Max coming

up behind him and immediately grabbed the chance to escape from the awkward situation she'd let herself fall into. She stood up, fumbling out of the chair, trying to ignore the dark gaze that was still staring at her in surprise, ready to walk away and pretend it had never happened.

"You can have the chair now if you want," she said as she walked past him, surprised by the flirtiness in her tone. What was *wrong* with her? This was such a bad idea. It was time to go and avoid ever talking to him again.

But Max dodged her, eyes fixed on the person she'd just walked around.

"Oh, hi, Mike!" The redhead said eagerly. "I didn't think I'd see you until later."

Eleven felt her blood to turn to ice. Wait... *this* was the guy she was supposedly, most definitely, not going on a double date with later?

*Shit.*

"Oh, Max, hey," the newly designated Mike looked as surprised as Eleven felt, his eyes going back and forth between the two girls like he didn't know where to look. "Um, what's up?"

"Ugh, I just spent like all my money on these stupid books," Max rolled her eyes with a sigh, totally oblivious to the panic that was currently overtaking her best friend. "It's good thing I have Dustin to buy me food because I'm so broke now." She glanced at El and then back at Mike, remembering. "Oh! You're still coming mini golfing with us tonight, right?"

"Um..." he looked uncomfortable, like he didn't know how to answer.

"I see you just met my roommate, Eleven, and she totally said she didn't want go because she thought you'd be a giant nerd, and I mean she's kind of right, but," Max's eyes glinted, taking in the matching blushes, revealing she'd seen the whole thing, "apparently you guys were having a nice chat, so it shouldn't be a problem now, right?"

You could cut the awkwardness with a knife. Eleven wanted to sink

into the floor, her entire brain screaming at her to run away from Max's embarrassing confession of her apparent disgust at the guy she was going to be forced to deal with... which was suddenly not so disgusting of a notion. She couldn't make herself look at either of them, trying to think of something that would make it clear how she felt.

"I'm *not* going on a *date*," she blurted, then winced. Fuck, how was that any less terrible?

Max was shooting her a glare that said, "don't be rude" but Eleven kept staring at the floor, face absolutely burning. She felt sort of bad, but as cute as Mike was—*he's not even that cute stop thinking that*—she was serious about not dating anyone. Or going on dates with anyone. It was a bad idea and she didn't want him getting some idea that even though she'd totally just flirted with him, she wasn't about to throw herself at him or something crazy. She waited for him to get offended or annoyed.

Mike cleared his throat and surprised her again.

"Um, it doesn't have to be date, I mean... I won't try and make it a date." He reached up and scratched the back his neck nervously, trying to act casual but just looking kind of awkward as he stooped. "Honestly, I'm totally shit at mini golf but I promised Dustin I would go so I can't back out now. If you want to just laugh at me while I suck for like an hour that's okay. No pressure or... whatever."

His phrasing was awkward like the rest of him, but Eleven got the point of his ramble.

*It's not a date. But you don't have to go.*

She considered that for a second and then shifted, crossing her arms and assessing his tall frame. "Dustin will still make you go even if I don't? You can't just opt out?" she asked, curious as to why he would want to willingly thirdwheel one of the grossest couples on the planet.

"Yeah, well, I made a promise so..." he shrugged, "can't break it now."

Eleven was pretty sure her entire life was a broken promise and she couldn't make herself understand what he meant, but part of her took pity on him. She'd thirdwheeled for Max and Dustin several times last semester—out of the goodness of her heart—and it was definitely not fun watching them suck face for three hours. She sighed but nodded, deciding to not be *that* bitch. At least not this time.

"I'll go—" She conceded, watching Max's eyes light up, ignoring her friend and turning to Mike, "—but only so you don't have to thirdwheel their disgusting tricycle."

Max looked rightfully offended at the jab but Mike guffawed out right, his laugh snorting into his nose as he covered his mouth with his hand, trying to muffle the outrageous noise coming out of him. It was like nothing Eleven had ever heard before.

*Holy shit, his laugh is amazing*, she blinked.

"I think I have to love you a little bit just because of that," he grinned and Eleven felt something in her stomach twist at *that* word. She quickly looked away.

"Yeah, well, just promise not to fall in love with me and we'll get along just fine," she shot back, trying to tell him not to get too familiar with her yet.

One conversation and an act of pity didn't mean he was allowed to be cozy yet. But instead of immediately agreeing, there was a breath of silence where he looked down at her, brows furrowed, like he was thinking about something serious. He opened his mouth to reply.

"You guys sure you don't want it to be date?" Max interrupted, looking excited.

The two looked at each other, then back at her, wearing matching frowns. Eleven was flustered again, annoyed that her friend was trying to ruin the boundaries she'd only just set up.

"No!"

She and Mike said it at the same time, then shot each other a glare, like they were mad for being so in synch. What was up with this?!

Why couldn't he just be boring and stupid like everyone else she met?

Eleven flushed, staring down at her shoes again, trying to take a deep breath and calm her sudden anxiety. Maybe this wouldn't be worst thing ever. He wasn't a total asshole or boring, so at least she wouldn't be surprised. And it would give her something to spend her money on.

Her own, secret money, that she was earning herself. The money she'd made after taking the job in the Cafeteria at the smoothie counter. The job Papa didn't know about...

Her phone buzzed in the pocket of her long brown skirt, the distinct, custom-set vibration alerting her to who it was before she even checked. With a sigh, she pulled it from her pocket, turning away from her best friend and new acquaintance and quickly walking out of the noisy store and into the cold January air without explanation, grateful to abandon the awkward situation but not looking forward to the call. She answered, frowning.

"Hello, Papa."

"Jane," his voice was like oil, thick and suffocating, "I see you bought your books. And some other... supplies?"

"Just highlighters and notebooks... some sticky notes to mark pages, more pencil lead, and a new lock. We get lockers for our A&P class, to store our bags in while we're in the lab."

"Ah, that makes sense. Well, very good then. You'll call me tomorrow evening and tell me about your first day of classes, of course." It was a demand, not a suggestion, and she stifled a sigh.

"Yes, Papa."

"And tonight you're pre-reading your textbooks?"

"Of course," she tried to keep the lie from her voice, "what else would I do?"

"Some people like to spend their time doing frivolous activities... I've never understood why," his tone was condescending, as if people who



chose to have fun were beneath him. “I was just checking in, but I’ve got to go now.”

“Bye, Papa.”

He hung up without saying goodbye as usual and she let herself breathe again. It had taken years for her to allow him to trust her enough to get rid of the GPS tracker in her phone when she was in high school, but she played the ever obedient, perfect child since then and he didn’t suspect what she was trying to do. How she was slowly chipping away at her freedom, bit by bit.

Max was standing a few feet away, like usually did during the phone calls. Papa had only allowed their friendship because he knew Eleven wouldn’t survive without at least one friend, and while Max was boisterous, she knew how to play polite and gracious. And she had saved Eleven’s life in tenth grade, after his expectations had weighed too heavy. He was cold, cruel, and calculating, but he never forgot when someone did him a favor—even if it was just Max.

As Eleven shoved the phone back into her skirt pocket, her friend came closer, looping their arms and pulling her back towards their dormitory, looking smug as they walked. The sidewalk was frozen still, but the snow had been cleared away and Eleven squinted her eyes against the bright sunlight, wishing she’d grabbed her sunglasses. Midwest winters were like that, you wanted your sunglasses to block the reflection of the sun on the snow or you’d go damn near blind.

Max was unusually silent as they walked and Eleven groaned, knowing what was coming but not wanting to hear it. It didn’t take very long.

“You like him, don’t you?”

“Max, please, I already told you—”

Her friend gasped. “Oh my god, you *do*!”

“What are you basing that on?” Eleven scoffed, trying to hide her sweating palms.

“Uh, because you didn’t immediately tell me what’s wrong with him so—”

“He’s too tall.” She quickly picked an attribute even though his height hadn’t actually bothered her at all. Not even a little. Nothing about him really did. “I almost snapped my neck just looking at him.”

“Now you’re just being picky, come on! He’s cute, in an awkward kind of way, like Michael Cera? Well, Michael Cera with like... a jawline. And cheekbones. So an attractive Michael Cera...”

She blathered on as they walked, arm-in-arm, lost in her own thoughts. He had been awfully good-looking, in a geeky kind of way, and Eleven had liked his sense of humor. He hadn’t been butthurt when she confronted him, like some guys were, and had even tried to joke back instead of put her down to feel better. And he hadn’t seem offended when she’d basically said out loud that she didn’t want go on a date with him, in fact he seemed fairly laidback. Other than the not-breaking-a-promise thing, which wasn’t necessarily bad, but she couldn’t understand it. No one she’d ever known had really kept their promises, not even Max—though hers usually had good intentions and failed due to forgetfulness and not blatant disinterest or anger.

Not like Papa.

“What’s his last name?” she interrupted Max’s stream of consciousness, curious and hoping it wouldn’t make her friend think she was actually interested.

“Hm? Oh... uh, Wheeler, I think...” she paused for a second and then went back to her ranting, unfazed by the question.

Eleven pondered further, realizing the name was familiar... where had she seen it? Oh, the TA for her A&P lab had a similar name, maybe she would check her schedule when they made it back to the room... her mind brought his face back up, the midnight eyes that had filled her with warmth, like a pitch black summer night.

Mike Wheeler. It was a pretty decent name, for a dorky, semi-sweet, promise-keeping best friend’s boyfriend’s roommate.

Suddenly she was hit by a thought.

He hadn't promised not to fall in love with her.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

let me know what you think. this is me going for realistic. it's a bit of a vent piece in some ways but it's also supposed to be a journey of acceptance and self-love. i think a lot of the notes will go further into that as each chapter is posted. you'll see what i mean.

i love you all a lot.

<3

-g

## 2. You make me feel out of my element

### Notes for the Chapter:

i have so much of this written i couldn't resist posting another chapter so soon. also i'm excited for you all to meet bonejangles later on. that's vague sorry.

i'm glad you all like it so far! i've been meaning to respond to comments but i've just been so busy/draind lately. i still have homework to do tonight lmao. but i still love each and every one of you. in case you doubted that.

have a double date and some info about el.

"You should wear it, Ellie. It's super cute."

"I shouldn't have even bought it," Eleven sighed, moodily looking back at her small selection of shoes and avoiding her friend's gaze. "And it's way too dressy for min golf, be real Max."

Max was holding up the cute, pink dress Eleven had hidden in her closet. The skirt was flowy and tea-length, short for Eleven's standards, with no sleeves and sweetheart neckline, the empire waist cutting in right where it would be the most flattering. It would look perfect on her but she'd never had the courage to even try it on. She'd bought it on a whim, after staring it in a shop window for several weeks, wanting to spend her money on something *she* wanted. But she would never wear it, she already knew that. It had been a stupid idea, wishful thinking.

Most of the time she wore long, ankle-brushing skirts with cozy, long-sleeve sweaters or shirts that covered her completely. Sure, she got hot in the summertime and sometimes even just sitting in class... but it was better than everyone seeing the scars.

"You're going to wear it, Eleven. I'm going to make you do it at some point," Max schemed as Eleven snatched the dress away and shoved

it back into her closet.

"It's too short..." she scoffed, shaking her head, "Everyone will see."

"You could wear tights with it, and maybe like a long-sleeve shirt underneath?"

"That would look stupid. Just drop it, okay?"

Max did, knowing better than to push her friend on certain subjects, clothing being one of them, but she couldn't help peeping out one last comment,

"I bet Mike would think it's cute..."

Eleven turned, glaring daggers and Max immediately winced, regretting pushing too much.

"I don't care what Mike thinks, I'll wear whatever the hell I want!" Eleven snapped.

She sat back down at her desk, staring at herself in the mirror with a sigh. She'd put on mascara and some powder that morning as usual, but there was a tiny part of her that wanted to reach for her eyeshadow, oomph it up a bit. So she did, letting the guilt of snapping at her friend fill her as she dabbed a darker brown color in crease to contrast with the light brown shade on her lid. After a tense moment she sighed, knowing she'd been too harsh, the subject just too tender to want to deal with. She wore what she wore for a reason.

"Do you want to do my hair, Max?" she asked abruptly.

It was a peace offering. She knew when she was a bitch and tried to apologize for it when she caught herself. Even though Max was a tomboy, she'd mastered braiding and ponytails. To keep the hair out of her face as she skateboarded and roughhoused with the boys.

"Yeah!" Max brightened.

Eleven's brown waves were on the shorter side, just brushing past her shoulders, but Max would always find something to do with it. They

discussed their class schedules—they didn't share any classes this semester unfortunately—as Max's fingers deftly weaved a tiny braid across Eleven's forehead, tucking it behind her ear, making a tiny crown. It kept her bangs out of her eyes, making the hazel-tinted browns look bigger.

"Um..." Max sounded nervous as Eleven examined her hair with a satisfied smile, "will you... can you help me with makeup?"

The question was so unexpected Eleven nearly fell out of her chair. Max? Wearing *makeup*? Was the world ending? Her expression of shock made the redhead frown.

"Don't look at me like that! I'm not going to start wearing dresses and perfume or something, I just want to... try it out," she defended. "You're good at it and I'm not. Just show me the basics or something."

Only once had Eleven had offered to do Max's makeup—for prom—and her friend had looked so disgusted that she decided not to try again. Which was why it was such a surprise. What was happening to her? There was only one explanation Eleven could think of, immediately frowning.

"You're—Why do you—you've never—" She tried to form a coherent sentence that wouldn't be offensive but failed. "Is this because of Dustin? Are you going to change because of him?" Her voice came out harsher than she intended and Max immediately went on the defense.

"What? No!" She was scowling. "Do you really think I would change myself because of some *guy*? Gross... no. I just—I want to try it, okay? I never have and it seems like something I want to try now. Can you not judge me for that?"

Eleven stared, still a bit surprised. "Um..."

"I'll hold you down and fart on you if you judge me, I swear to god," she huffed.

There was the regular Max. Eleven deflated a bit, feeling guilty for assuming the worst. Of course her friend wasn't going to suddenly

change... but it made her nervous, imagining her best friend, her sister really, becoming someone she didn't know. Influenced by a boy or not. But she bit her tongue, nodding instead, deciding to help. She would do anything for Max.

"Alright, sure. Switch me places," she said easily and then allowed herself to look grossed out, "and don't fart on me, Jesus, I thought we got past that in high school!"

Max snickered in reply.

In half an hour they were ready to go, Max wearing the barest hint of mascara and eyeliner, looking pleased with herself. Eleven hadn't bothered to change her clothes, but had traded out her boots for a pair of comfy white high top Chucks. A strange knot of nervousness twisted her stomach and she shoved it down, refusing to let some guy make her feel... anything.

There was a knock on the door and Max bounced across the room, throwing it open with a smile. Dustin and Mike were standing outside, Dustin grinning widely as he pulled his girlfriend into a kiss. Eleven winced automatically.

"You guys, I thought we set up rules about that last month..." she complained mildly. It didn't actually bother her too much, but she knew if she gave them an inch they would end up screwing in her bed. She shuddered at the thought. "Kissing is fine when I'm not in direct line of sight, or in the room."

Max pulled back and invited them in despite Eleven's protest. Their room was... okay. Eleven's bed and desk were neatly organized, a few papers and pieces of clothing hanging around but the space was overall clean. Max's side was more or less a disaster, but she kept it to her areas so Eleven didn't mind. It was better than living with someone she didn't know and somehow the messy piles of clothes and books and bedding made her feel more at home.

"Should we go?" Mike asked, shifting uncomfortably and pointedly trying to avoid looking at a bra Max had left hanging from the bunkbed. "I don't want to be out too late anyways. Classes start tomorrow and I don't want to be tired on the first day back."

Eleven felt herself smiling and quickly squelched it. She'd been thinking almost the exact same thing, wanting to come back and be asleep in time to get eight hours before her nine A.M. class. It was convincing enough of a plea to get the actual couple moving and they chattered excitedly as the group walked out to the parking lot. To her surprise, Mike pulled out his keys, unlocking a silver, older model Subaru Outback. Dustin and Max climbed into the back seat and with a resigned sigh Eleven took shotgun, feeling unsure. The car didn't smell like old Taco Bell and sweaty socks, like Dustin's beat up station wagon, and she felt pleasantly surprised that it wasn't a total mess, noticing D&D figures hanging from the rearview mirror next to a little tree deodorizer. Cute.

*No, not cute. He's not allowed to be cute,* she scolded herself.

Mike tossed the auxiliary cord into her lap, breaking her from her thoughts with a friendly smile. Her heart sped up against her wishes.

"You can DJ if you want, since you're copilot—Hey!" He glared into the rearview mirror at the two behind them who were definitely making out a little bit. "I've told you guys before, no sex in the back of Gandalf!"

"Gandalf?" Eleven's eyebrows shot up her forehead and Mike looked embarrassed.

"Um, yeah, that's my car's name. Cause it's grey... well, silver, I guess, but you know. Gandalf the Grey?" He put it into reverse and started backing out. "Dustin kind of named it, but it stuck so..."

"That's so *nerdy*," she blurted. "Why not something Star Wars, at least that's... common knowledge nerd."

Mike looked surprised. "Don't tell me you've never seen Lord of the Rings? One of the greatest cinematic trilogies of our time, and best written trilogy ever? Don't tell me you haven't!" His voice cracked at the audacity of it all.

Eleven bit her lip, quickly looking out the window and shrugging noncommittally. She didn't want to admit that she actually *loved* Lord of the Rings. For the most part she didn't watch movies or TV shows



—she simply hadn't had time growing up, between her ballet classes, tennis lessons, piano lessons and several hours of intense tutoring. And Papa thought that screens melted your brain, only allowing her to buy a laptop for college after she showed him the syllabus of her College Writing class and it's massive amounts of papers. So no, other than whatever movie Max dragged her to at the theater, she hadn't seen a whole lot of anything.

But Papa had an expansive library full of first editions and gilded covers that she would sneak into occasionally. Tolkien's trilogy had caught her eye and she'd devoured them under her covers late at night, finishing all three in two and a half weeks at the age of nine. She reread them once a year. They were that good.

"I... haven't *seen* Lord of the Rings," she admitted, "but I read the books. They're pretty great, actually." *Huge understatement. Oh well.*

"Have you read the Hobbit? Or the Silmarillion?"

She blinked, mouth gaping. "There's *more*?"

"Yeah, like a prequel and then the Silmarillion... it's a pain in the ass to read because it's super stuffy, but it's like lore of Elves and how Men were created. I'll lend you mine if you want, I kind of..." he wiped his sweaty palms on the steering wheel cover, feeling embarrassed again at just how much of a nerd he was. "I reread them every year, so I brought them with me."

"Oh."

*Shit*, she swore, feeling the back of her neck prick, trying to understand how this guy was pretty much perfect. Part of her wanted to admit it and geek out, but she wasn't ready to share that with Mike yet. It was too intimate. She didn't even know him. She shouldn't try and let him get to know her either.

After that she clammed up, letting the silence be filled by the sound of her playlist, the one she'd titled "drive bitch drive" which was just a generic list of her favorites she was content to listen to while in the car. Usually Max talked the whole time, so Eleven was used to not really paying attention to her music, but of course the damn playlist

picked the most romantic song, as if the universe was laughing at her internal struggle.

*“Kiss me... out of the bearded barley. Lightly, beside the green green grass...”*

*Swing swing, swing your spinning step, you’ll wear those shoes and I will wear that dress...”*

Max and Dustin were too busy arguing about who was going to win at mini golf to notice the tense awkwardness in the front of the car. Eleven wanted to change the song but she knew that would just make it obvious, instead sitting in pained silence as the words filled the space between them.

*“Oh, kiss me beneath the milky twilight, lead me out on the moonlit floor.*

*Lift your open hand, strike up the band and make the fireflies dance, silver moon’s sparkling.”*

Mike cleared his throat as he flicked on the turn signal.

*“So kiss me...”*

The song mercifully ended and switched to some Justin Timberlake radio hit and Eleven visibly relaxed, unsure of why the whole situation made her tense in the first place. It’s not like a song about kissing was suddenly going to make Mike lean over and kiss her, but clearly he’d been uncomfortable too.

Whatever.

They pulled into the parking lot where the mini golf course was at, a huge warehouse looking building that had been converted into a “FunPlex” with mini golf, bowling alleys, lasertag, and a huge arcade. A “money dump” as Papa used to call it. Eleven had gone with Max a few times to birthday parties here when they were younger, but she hadn’t been to one in years.

Before she knew it they were inside, picking out putters and ball colors.

"Pink, please," she said to the bored-looking teen who ran the stand. Max picked red, of course, Dustin green, and Mike blue. The course was pretty empty—in fact the whole building was empty. It was a Sunday night in January so most people were in their warm homes getting ready for work or school the next day. Where she *wanted* to be.

The first course was a literal straight shot, which Max and Dustin both got on their first try. It took Eleven three tries (no one dared to laugh at her) and then Mike went last, taking a record fourteen attempts to get it in the hole. His face was scarlet as he picked it out of the cup, avoiding eye contact.

"Wow, dude, I thought you were just trying to get it out of when you said you sucked," Max was staring at him, "but you really weren't kidding."

"I have bad hand-eye coordination," he muttered, clearly annoyed with himself.

Eleven surprised herself and took pity.

"Not everybody spent their whole life playing video games and football, Max. We can't all be superstars at everything," she shot back as she walked to the second hole.

"Yeah but... *fourteen*? On the *first* hole?"

"You don't have to stay and watch me," Mike shrugged, biting his lip, "you guys can go on ahead or whatever, I literally don't care."

He looked crestfallen, like maybe he had actually expected to have a good time and Eleven once again found herself taking pity. What was it about him that made her such a softie all of the sudden? She sighed heavily and made a decision she hoped she wouldn't regret.

"I'll stay with him, you guys can leave us in the dust. I'm not great at this either anyways," she sighed casually, inspecting her golf ball and rubbing a scuff mark on the pink orb.

Max looked utterly delighted at the prospect of leaving the two of them alone and quickly sped through the second hole, pulling Dustin

along behind her before he could protest. Eleven had barely set her ball on the starting point and the couple were already two holes ahead of them. They were good and pointedly trying to leave the others with no choice but to socialize. She decided to pretend she didn't notice.

"You didn't have to stay behind," Mike's voice was quiet behind her, like he felt bad that she was being nice.

Something about his tone of voice hit something inside of her. The look of embarrassment on his face had been real and somehow she got the feeling he was self-conscious about the whole situation. Nope. She'd already been this nice, might as well keep it going. Putting her shoulders back, she stood up to her full height, cocking an eyebrow, and turned to look at him, noting the confused expression on his pretty, freckled face.

*Stop it, she told herself. That's too far.*

"Uh, yeah I did," she turned back to her ball, casually setting her putter next to it and lining up the shot. "You said I could come and laugh at you for an hour while you sucked at mini golf and I fully intend to take advantage of that offer." She hit her pink ball and watched as it sailed down the green, bumping into the rock obstacle and bouncing away from the hole. She frowned sourly, and then sighed.

"Oh... did I really say that?" he asked from behind her. "It sounds like something stupid I would say..."

She turned back to him and noticed he looked confused and a little embarrassed, his cheeks flushing that adorable shade of red again. Rolling her eyes she stepped off the course, trying to hide a smile, trying to turn his attention back to the game.

"Sure did. Take your turn so I can start laughing."

Her voice was gruff, but she was losing the battle to not smirk, the laughter filling her eyes. It took a moment for him to realize she was teasing him and he relaxed, breaking into a relieved grin that made her heart go all staccato again.

"Alright, alright," he conceded, sighing heavily as if she'd just asked him to steal the Declaration of Independence. "Just don't cackle, okay? Lucas has this cackle that drives me nuts, and he knows it too, so anytime I do something remotely stupid he's cackling behind me and making me feel worse..."

He'd lined up his ball and putter and swung, hitting the ball so hard it flew across the green, hitting the back wall and bouncing, rolling back towards him and finally reaching its resting spot. Back at his feet where it had started. He groaned.

"Shit."

"That was... pretty bad," Eleven agreed reluctantly. She wasn't on some mission to make him feel worse, but she couldn't hold in a snort.

"Yeah, yeah, get it out and then take your turn," he rolled his eyes but looked amused.

It continued on that way for a while, bantering a bit as they played. Eleven tried to take it easy on him at first, but he called her out on it pretty quickly. She shrugged amiably and then proceeded to totally kick his ass, figuring he already knew she was going to win anyways. No matter how hard he squinted and schemed, it took him a minimum of fifteen strokes at every hole and Eleven would end up watching him with laughing eyes as he muttered obscenities under his breath and finished by himself.

"I feel like you have to practice being this bad," she commented, grinning again as he lined himself up again for another shot. "Do you come here on weekends and knock golf balls around for fun?"

Mike grunted, frowning down at the blue ball, shifting his hips to try and get into a good stance, his gangly limbs making it hard since his putter was little too short to really be of any use. He spoke as he eyed the shot, glaring at the windmill he was aiming for.

"Yeah, I spend my valuable time—which I could be using to study for Advanced Calculus class or working on my Computational Physics project—to come to this *dump*." He did a few backswings to practice,

but Eleven noticed he was too tense. "...and try to and be as *terrible* as possible at this *mediocre* game just to try and entertain my roommate's girlfriend's best friend who was dragged into a double date without knowing even though she probably has *way* better things to do than watch me suck at this," he ranted, getting more and more worked up with each sentence. "But sure, yeah! I practice so *hard* to be *terrible*!"

His frustration bubbled over.

He swung hard, too hard, and the putter slipped from his grip, flying up and arcing through the air. They watched in stunned amazement as it sailed downward, towards the decorative, Dutch windmill replica. It bounced off one of the blades, making the whole structure shudder, the panels making a groaning noise.

And then the entire front part fell off, crashing down onto the green below with a loud *boom!* that echoed through the building, the blades cracking and falling apart. It was deathly silent as the dust settled.

"You... how did you... that was..." Eleven was almost speechless, gaping at Mike, who looked equally stunned, turning to look over his shoulder at her with huge eyes.

There was a shout from the front of the building and she didn't have time to think before she felt him grab her hand and pull. She dropped the putter, realizing that he was right: they needed to get out of there.

His voice broke her from her shock. "Run!"

A person in a FunPlex vest appeared and she let herself be yanked away, speeding up to get away, and then they were *sprinting* from the course, dodging through the arcade games, past the bowling alley and out the front doors. They busted out, Mike charging, his long legs comically galloping, and then ran around the side of the building, hiding where they weren't immediately visible. Eleven was panting, trying to catch her breath after the sudden escape, pretty sure she hadn't run that fast in years. She turned to Mike, her eyes huge, and saw he had on a similar expression, equally breathless.

“Um—” She tried to find words but he shook his head.

“Don’t. Please don’t say anything,” he pleaded, voice cracking with embarrassment.

His face was serious, dead serious, ebony eyes dark. But then a grin cracked his face and he laughed that doofy laugh, snorting through his nose and Eleven lost it. She straight up guffawed, cackling at the absurdity of it all. Had that really just happened?

“You—” she was laughing so hard she could hardly talk. “You *broke* the mini golf!”

“I didn’t mean to!” His face hurt from grinning, his chest heaving as he snorted. “It just... flew out of my hand!”

She finally managed to catch her breath after another minute of hysterical laughing, clutching her aching abdominals and wiping a tear from her eye. This guy was a *nut*. A huge nerd. The biggest dork she’d ever met in her life. He was *amazing*.

Something in her chest felt warm, and she looked down, realizing he was still clutching her hand.

“Oh, um...”

He looked down and immediately dropped her hand, his face flushing.

“S-Sorry. My survival instinct kicked in. I couldn’t leave you behind,” he explained and she watched curiously as he turned an even brighter shade of red. “No man left behind... um, or woman, I guess, uh, not that you couldn’t take care of yourself but I didn’t think to—”

She cut him off before he verbally tripped even more. “I get it, Mike, calm down. I’ll allow you the one handhold this time,” she was still smiling, eyes dancing, not realizing she hadn’t let a guy hold her hand... pretty much ever. It had felt nice.

He gulped. “Oh... cool.”

“Cool,” she agreed.

Then she shivered, realizing the freezing January air was creeping up under her skirt, freezing her legs a bit. The warmth of his hand had kept her from noticing but she couldn't pretend she wasn't getting chilly. "Actually, it is kind of cold, um, do you think we should get Max and Dustin?"

She started to reach for her phone in her skirt pocket, pulling it out. Mike waved off her concern, glancing back towards the corner they had hidden around, like he was still hesitant to go back into the building after what had happened.

"Nah," he shrugged off her concern, "they're probably spending all their money on skee-ball or Dig Dug. I can take you back if you want though."

"What about your promise?" Her eyes captured his, honey-brown meeting ebony as he shrugged again.

"Well... technically the promise was to come out and hang out with you, which I did so..." he grinned crookedly, "I think I've fulfilled my end of the bargain."

Her damn heart decided to do a little dance again and she quickly looked down at her phone to try and avoid blushing. What she saw quickly solved that problem, every blood vessel turned to ice as she read the notification on the screen.

*One Missed Call: Martin Brenner.*

"Oh, fuck," she gasped.

"What? Is everything okay?" Mike looked instantly worried.

"Um, sort of..." she shook her head, not wanting to explain. "I have to make a call, sorry."

Her heart was pounding now, but with fear, and she quickly pressed the call back button, walking a few feet away from Mike and listening to the sound of the ringing, trying to think up a lie. She must not have felt it vibrating while they were running away and she cursed herself for getting lost in the moment. He picked up, not bothering to answer.



“Papa, sorry I—”

“What were you doing, Jane? I thought you were reading your textbooks.” His voice was harsh, disbelieving, the ice thick.

“I was, but I stepped out of my room to get... a soda, from the vending machine,” she said, closing her eyes and hoping it didn't sound like total bullshit. “I left my phone on the charger on my desk, I'm sorry—”

A disappointed huff. “Soda, Jane? Really? That's terrible for your teeth *and* skin.”

She almost collapsed in relief as he bought the lie.

“I-I know, I dumped most of it after the first sip, I was just weak in the moment and I haven't had sugar in weeks—” Another lie. “It was a stupid idea, I'm sorry I missed your call. I'm, um, reading now.”

“What are you reading?” His tone dripped chilly water down her spine.

“Wh-what?”

“What textbook are you reading right now?”

“Um,” she remembered the book she'd looked through in line at the bookstore earlier that day and blurted it out, “Abnormal Psychology.”

“Psychology? Shouldn't you be focusing more on the physical parts of the brain and not the fluff within? Brain surgeons don't need to know what's going on in the mind, Jane. Only which parts to cut.”

“I know, Papa, I just thought—”

“Drop the class. You shouldn't be taking so many extracurriculars.”

“It's not an extracurricular, it's a general education class. I'm required to take a psychology or sociology credit. My advisor said I can't graduate without it.” She bit her lip, foraging on. “And it helps, I'm learning what each lobe controls, memories or movement. That's important... I just figured it wouldn't hurt to learn that through this

class."

There was a rare pause.

"Very well, then. But don't let it take priority over your other *necessary* classes."

"Yes, Papa."

"And don't forget to call me tomorrow."

"Yes, Papa." She repeated quietly.

The line went dead, the interrogation over, and she almost collapsed in relief. After a moment she walked back to the side of the building and leaned against it, sliding down until she was sitting on the cold concrete. He had bought it, the whole lie. She'd had to tell him about the psych class... but at least he wasn't aware of her sudden social life. Papa had always had a goal for her, since he brought her home from the hospital and handed her over to one of the many faceless nannies. It had been the same with those before her, though they'd been adopted when they were older. He wanted her to be a surgeon, a brain surgeon specifically, to fix broken brains and save lives. Earn prestige and money, become well known and add to his merits along with her adopted siblings. Give him the glory.

But that wasn't *her* dream. What she wanted was to confront her darkness, the thing that had gripped her and controlled her all her life. To try and make sense of it, to try and help *others* make sense of it. She knew what she wanted to be, the very thing he had scoffed at on the phone.

She wanted to be a psychologist. She wanted to make a difference, to help others understand that they weren't alone and they didn't have to give in. That there was hope, however dim and distant it may seem.

But Papa couldn't *know*.

"Was that your dad?" A low voice asked and she suddenly remembered she wasn't alone.

Mike was standing over her and she blinked up at him.

"No," she said simply.

"Oh..." Mike looked confused. "But you called him—"

"Papa? I know. That's what he likes," she shrugged, "I'm adopted though, so he's not actually my dad. I don't really like claiming him as that, it feels weird. I just call him Papa like the others did."

Mike was clearly curious, twitching and glancing at her again. "You mentioned that earlier... something about being the eleventh?"

"Yeah, it's why people who know me call me Eleven. I like that better."

He scooted down next to her, sitting close enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from his sweater. She shivered a bit and resisted leaning in closer, closing her eyes and trying to just breathe.

"Why's that?" His voice interrupted her thoughts again.

"Hm?" She turned her head enough to look at him.

"Why do you like that better? And, um... what's your actual name? If you don't mind me asking..."

"Jane. Jane Brenner. Originally Ives, but Papa changed it legally after he adopted me. It was my mom's last name, but I never knew her. I was a drug baby." She didn't know why she was telling him so much. Usually she clammed up around people she barely knew, but something about him just made her want to talk. His eyes were warm and understanding and she didn't feel the usual fear of judgement. "She died delivering me. I barely made it, and then they had to wean me off the crack. A lot of babies don't make it. That's why Papa picked me. He said I was fighter, that I wanted to live."

Something inside of her ached and she tugged at her sleeves self-consciously.

"I'm... sorry?" Mike's thin brows were furrowed, like he wasn't sure how to respond.

She shrugged. "Don't be. None of us ask to be born. It just happens."

It was quiet, but comfortably so. Eleven got the feeling he was really listening and absorbing her words, something few people bothered to do. It differed from the flirty teasing from earlier but was preferred to the awkwardness in the bookstore. He was just so easy to be around.

"So... why don't you like being called Jane?" He was clearly still curious.

"That's just... not *me*." It was a sorry explanation but it went deeper than she wanted to think. "That's who *he* wants me to be... or pretends I am. A perfect daughter with perfect looks and perfect grades who lives her perfect life and flashes her perfect smile." Her voice hardened. "And I'm nowhere near perfect. I'd rather be Eleven. It's an odd number."

"Odd, huh?" There was a touch of a smile quirking his lips and she quickly looked away, hiding her own smile. "Odd is good."

It was quiet again as he sat and processed what she'd said. Both of them stared at the darkening sky. The sun set so early in the winter, Eleven sometimes forgot how quickly days went by. The clouds were pink and orange and she gazed up at them, wondering if she should try and take watercolor painting just to try and capture how beautiful the colors were. Mike's voice brought her back.

"Sorry your—whatever-you-call-him sucks so bad," he said quietly.

Eleven sighed heavily, grimacing. "He's paying for college, that's the only reason I'm talking to him still. I'm technically an adult now, so even though he owns pretty much everything I have, he doesn't own *me* anymore. He can't make me pretend forever. I won't let him."

"Yeah, but having to grow up like that—" He started.

"I don't need your pity, Mike," she cut him off, frowning. "I get enough of that, okay?"

He was fidgeting with his sweater, pulling on a string at the hem. He let out a heavy sigh, like he wanted to argue his point but didn't want to actually argue.

"I know you don't *need* it. You don't seem to need a lot. I was just trying to be sympathetic," he shrugged, "but I won't be if you don't want me to."

"Thanks." She shivered again, realizing her hands were red and cold, her nose numb. "Hey, can you drive me back now? My butt is almost frozen to the sidewalk..."

He laughed easily and the tension melted. "Sure."

Standing up wasn't a problem for him with his long limbs but she paused, trying to figure out the best way to try and propel herself upright. He held out his hands to help her, smiling.

"Here," he offered.

She took his warm hands in her freezing ones and he pulled. The angle caused her baggy sleeves to fall down and she made it upright just as he glanced down at her suddenly bare forearms. His eyes widened at the sight of what crossed her skin there, the familiar shock filling his face. Her heart dropped into her stomach and she snatched her hands back, pulling the sleeves down, trying to cover what she knew he had already seen.

"Wait, are those—" he started to say, but she cut him off with a hiss.

*"Don't."*

He shut up and they walked back to the car—Gandalf—in silence. The ice that had been sitting in Eleven's stomach crept into her bones, freezing her to her seat as she stared out the window. The atmosphere was tense as it became clear he didn't know what to say after that. His awkwardness—which had been kind of cute before—was now an obvious burden, filling the air and making it impossible to think. Eventually the silence became unbearable and she grabbed the aux cord that was dangling between the seat, plugging in her phone and putting on a random playlist, figuring he wouldn't care. The familiar opening chords of one of her favorite songs and the voice of Robert Smith filtered through the speakers and she relaxed automatically.

*"I would say I'm sorry if I thought that it would change your mind*

*But I know that this time I have said too much, been too unkind."*

"Boy's Don't Cry?"

Mike's voice almost startled her and she looked over at him, eyebrows raised.

"You like The Cure?" she couldn't help but be surprised. They were like emo before emo was even a thing and she rarely found people who liked them, even though they'd been one of her favorites back in high school.

"Of course. This song got me through me middle school *and* high school."

"Ha..." she pictured a tiny, baby marshmallow version of him. "Were you a crybaby?"

The tension evaporated and Mike's shoulder visibly relaxed as he drove them, letting himself smile again.

"A little bit, yeah, but my mom always told me it was better to feel everything than nothing. And that sometimes crying was just a part of feeling. Didn't stop the bullies," he shrugged, "but unlike them I can express emotions in a healthy way instead of being an alcoholic or a deadbeat so I think I kind of won."

"Your mom sounds smart," Eleven guessed. "Or at least good at giving advice."

"She's okay." There was a grin on his face that made it clear he thought more of his mom than he wanted to admit. "She can make like... any kind of food. The cafeteria is shit compared to her cooking," he glanced over at Eleven. "If Max ever drags you over to our room, remind to give you some cookies. She sends me a box like, every week. I have to hide them from Dustin or he'll eat the whole thing in five minutes."

"Cookies?"

"Yeah, you know. The baked good? Small, sweet, usually full of chocolate chips?" He was grinning at her cheekily and she rolled her eyes, biting back a smile.

"I know what cookies are, thanks."

They'd arrived on campus and Mike turned on his signal as they approached the drop-off for her dorm. Despite everything she'd told him and what'd he seen, he was still treating her totally normally and she tried to fight the weird feeling in her stomach, the one that felt suspiciously close to butterflies. Butterflies weren't allowed. She swallowed them quickly, unbuckling her seatbelt as he talked.

"Oh, I also have to lend you the Hobbit, but I could always give it to Dustin to give to Max to give to—"

"Mike," she cut him off, turning to look at him as he parked in front of the tall building. "Why are you being so nice to me? Lending me books and cookies..." She swallowed again, sure she would regret her words but needing to asking anyways. "I've been a total bitch most of today. I wouldn't blame you if you didn't want to talk to me at all."

He blinked, surprised at how blunt she was. His face turned that shade of red again and he looked out the windshield instead of facing her.

"Well... I promised Dustin I'd be nice—"

*Of course, another one of his damn promises,* she thought sourly.

"—and, um, well, I dunno, I guess I kind of like you," he answered honestly. "You're kind of bitchy, yeah, but I don't think it's because you actually hate people. You just like who you like and that's cool. And it makes sense since your not-dad is total asshole, I wouldn't really want to trust people after that either." He took a quick breath, still red. "And like, you've got a good taste in music and books. You're honest which is nice, since most people I talk to just want me to proofread their essays or borrow my notes but they pretend they want to be my friend which is annoying. Oh, and you're hilarious... like, really funny. It's fun hanging out with you."

"Oh," she blinked, definitely stunned at the amount of nice words being thrown her way.

"I really liked hanging out with you today and I wouldn't mind doing it again sometime..." A pause. "Maybe without Max and Dustin?"

"I'm not dating anyone," she blurted and then winced, realizing it was a total overreaction. Her face grew hot. *Why did I assume he meant that? He literally said he wanted to be friends.* She tried to fix it, mumbling, "I mean... not right now."

There was a moment of silence where she was too embarrassed to look at him, a stab of anxiety shredding her stomach as he bit his lip. Would he only want to hang out with her as a more-than-friends thing? So far she'd liked being his friend. Like a lot. But it seemed like most guys weren't okay with that and she didn't expect him to be different.

"That's fine." He said it too easily. "I'm not—I mean, I'm cool being friends. I won't try anything and if you're not comfortable anyways we can forget. I kind of... just like hanging around you. If that's cool."

There was a lump in her throat and she tried to swallow it, the damn butterflies back again. Big butterflies. With huge wings, tickling her insides. That sounded nice... just hanging around someone.

"No... that would be... okay." Her head was nodding too quickly and she tried to break out of the stupid that was coating her brain. "I mean, I'd be cool with that."

"Yeah?" The word was full of hope.

"Y-Yeah."

She dared to look over and realized he was staring at her. Their eyes caught, like they had earlier, and she suddenly wondered how something so dark could be so warm. Both of their faces were flushed and for a moment they just gazed at each other, like some cheesy rom-com couple ending their first date. The car was quiet, she'd already unplugged her phone so the music was gone, and dark since



the sun had set. It was peaceful, just for a heartbeat, as they smiled at each other.

A pair of headlights flashed in the rearview mirror and Mike startled, glancing behind them and realizing he was blocking the loading zone.

"Um, I should probably move..." he said reluctantly, the moment breaking. "There's other people, um—"

She almost jumped out of her seat. "No, you're right, sorry." Grabbing the handle she opened the door and started to crawl out, feeling stupid and girlish and dumb and happy all at once. A hand touched her elbow.

"Oh hey," he said and she paused and looked at him as he pointed at towards her forehead. "Um, by the way, your hair looks really nice, El."

He smiled, a genuine smile, and something in her melted, the top sheet of ice that covered her heart cracking a bit.

"Oh..." She blanked, unable to think of an intelligent response to the compliment. "Um, uh—th-thanks. I'll see you around?"

His smile was so bright it almost blinded her and he nodded eagerly. "See you, El."

She shut the door quickly and walked away, hearing the sound of his car drive off. Her heart was racing, her palms sweating, and she quickly walked up the steps of the dorm, swiping her card almost automatically and walking through the lobby in a daze.

*He said he likes me. Even after all the shit I told him. And he saw the scars.*

It was hard to believe, that a guy was still genuinely interested, even after she'd all but hit him over the head with her baggage. He knew about Papa. About the expectations that weighed down on her like a suffocating blanket. About the scars that riddled her arms and legs like spiderwebs. And he hadn't run, hadn't hauled ass to get as far away from her as possible. It was odd, to not have to explain

everything and still somehow feel understood. Something about Mike Wheeler was so... different. From anyone she'd ever known.

Her hand reached up, touching the tiny braid Max had put in her hair. He'd noticed that, such a tiny thing, and...

*He called me El.*

El smiled quietly, keeping the weird warmth that bubbled in her stomach to herself, like a secret promise.

*He likes me.*

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

this is random but i actually love lord of the rings more than... most things. i have my own copies on my bookshelf and while i don't read them yearly (i'm not that dedicated) i do quite love them AND the movies. i've even got a little elvish tattoo. so i had to make them bond it over it.

enough about me.

this story is going to go to some dark places, places i've been personally not because i want to tell a story about love solving everyone's problems. i know getting a boyfriend doesn't "fix" emotional issues and depression. and it's not about that, though the love story is very important. again, i'll explain as i go because i want this to... mean something, i suppose.

hope you're ready for the slowest burn. sorry not sorry.

-g

### 3. I'm not through the night

#### Notes for the Chapter:

i promised to try and update semi-frequently and honestly i've been kind of itching to anyways. i'm going to try and pace myself but idk i'm so inconsistent lately.

like i said, this story is a slow burn that's going to go to some darker places emotionally. i want it to be a real journey. i hope you all don't mind.

if you've seen jessica jones on netflix, you might notice that max and el have kind of a similar relationship as jessica and trish. i really wanted to kind of explore that kind of closeness between the two of them. you'll see what i mean.

thanks for all the great comments so far, i'm feeling so encouraged despite my semi-comatose emotional state lately. heh.

“You like him, just *admit* it.”

El sighed at the tone of her friend's voice, annoyed that the conversation was still going on. Like it had last night. And that morning. And now again.

“Max, can you please stop? I really don't want to talk about it right now.”

“You never want to talk about it. We don't ever talk about it. You need to talk about it.”

“No, I really don't.”

“Come onnn,” Max whined. “Dustin told me he totally likes you, he keeps talking about cool you are.”

El closed her eyes and took a breath, feeling annoyed. They were on

their way to the caf to grab lunch with Dustin since they all had a free period and she was hungry. When she was hungry she was even more irritable. So she was hungry, irritable, and tired of having to think about *Mike* all the time. Max was ignoring her protests and she finally gave in and blurted out her thoughts, wanting to say something to get her friend to shut up.

"Yeah," she exclaimed, "I know he likes me! He told me that himself. Can you please drop it now?"

"He *told* you?!" Max looked stunned.

"Yes, it's not that big of a deal. I asked him why he was being nice when I was such a bitch and he said he liked me. That's it. It wasn't all gushy or whatever, he just thinks I'm a cool person... which just proves he's totally insane," she huffed.

"Oh my god! What did you say?"

"I told him I'm not dating anyone. He said that was fine. That's it," she spat, hurrying across the chilly sidewalk towards the large cafeteria on the south side of the campus where they lived. "So chill out."

They walked in and El made a beeline for the 24/7 breakfast bar, grabbing a cup of batter and pouring it onto one of the waffle irons that wasn't being used. The sight of the yellow batter bubbling merrily made her warm and fuzzy. Food was so great.

Max didn't want to give up so easily, grabbing a tray and piling bacon onto a plate.

"He said he was fine with it? Just like that?"

"Yup. He didn't pester *the ever-living fuck* out of me," she replied pointedly, crossing her arms as she waited for the batter to bake. "He's apparently insane but not annoying as hell. Ten points to Mike." It was a snort and she shot Max a glare.

"Alright, that's fair," Max knew when she was getting annoying. "But would you please just admit you like him back? And are you really having a waffle *again*? That's like the fifth time this week, and it's

only Wednesday.”

El scowled, dodging the first question. “What? I *like* waffles. It’s one of the only good things they serve here anyways.”

It had been a few days since the “double date” and while Max hadn’t constantly brought Mike up, she did other things that were equally frustrating. She kept trying to get El to go over to Dustin and Mike’s room, but the shorter girl had refused, knowing her friend’s motive. El decided if she randomly saw him again that would be fine, but she wasn’t in the mood to seek him out. He made her feel weird, the kind of weird she didn’t want to think about, and it was distracting to think about him at all. Not that she had been. Of course not. She actually needed to focus on school anyways, since the Anatomy class she’d signed up for was already starting to have quizzes. Hard quizzes. And labs. Hard labs with harder homework. College was hard.

Which reminded her of Mike again.

“So...” Max asked tentatively, “*do* you like him?”

“Max! I swear to god if you ask me on more time, I will have a full-blown freak out in the middle of this cafeteria. With screaming. And thrashing. I will tantrum and tell people you beat me. Don’t make me make a scene,” she threatened.

Max shut her mouth, finally taking her friend seriously, but sighed heavily, clearly upset she hadn’t been able to make her say it.

“Okay... fine. Sorry.”

The waffle iron beeped and El turned to pull out her lunch. They wandered through the caf silently, Max grabbing plates from here or there, piling them onto her tray. El grabbed a yogurt cup and some fruit and then a side of chicken strips from one of the other areas. After going through the checkout line she helped Max try and find Dustin in the crowded dining area, spotting his brightly colored hat from across the way, sitting in a booth. Mike was sitting across from him, towering above the crowd, along with their friend Lucas and she felt her heart rate go berserk as they walked towards them.

*Calm down*, she tried to tell herself. *It's just a boy*. Her eyes dragged across his face, watching as he smiled at something Dustin said, his dark eyes lighting up laughter. *A cute boy. No, stop that, just a boy*, she chided.

"Hey guys!" Max said cheerily, plopping into the open seat next to Dustin, who was already next to Lucas. The latter grumbled as he scooted over, pushing his massive pile of books and papers with him. The seat was clearly full.

El groaned internally but scooted into the other side next to Mike, trying not to look at him, focusing on her tray of food instead. She could almost feel him looking at her and stared intently at her waffle, hoping her face didn't look as hot as it felt. Her heart flip-flopped.

"Hey, babe," Dustin reached over and plucked a piece of bacon from his girlfriend's plate, earning himself a playful smack. Max looked at the others.

"Hi, Mike." He gave her a wave and she leaned around her boyfriend to give Lucas a friendly poke. "What's up, Lucas?"

"Formulas," the serious looking boy answered as he glared down at the study guide in front of him, not even noticing her finger in his tricept. "Exams. Homework. My fucking *sanity*."

Dustin snorted.

"It's barely been a week since the semester started, how are you already busy?"

"Because I'm a fucking *engineering* major."

"And whose fault is that?"

The two started bickering loudly and El sighed, reaching over and grabbing the strawberry yogurt she'd bought, ripping the aluminum lid off. She carefully poured the thick dairy product over half of her waffle, then grabbed some strawberries and sprinkled them on top. The other half was on the other side of her plate, and she put the chicken strips on top of it. From her pockets she grabbed the syrup packets and ripped them open, letting the sticky, sugary substance

drizzle over the chicken and waffle. With a content sigh she set her garbage in one corner of her tray and grabbed her fork.

Perfect.

“That’s like... art.”

Mike was staring at her appreciatively and she felt her stomach clench almost painfully. She hadn’t seen him since the date and the sight of his crooked grin made her almost want to throw up.

*Shit shit shit... I do like him.* The realization hit her like a truck. A giant monster truck with huge wheels, running over her and grinding her into the ground. *Shit shit shit.*

“Um... it’s just a waffle,” she replied lamely, feeling like her heart was going to grow legs and run away.

“It’s a *beautiful* waffle... seriously, look at it!” He gestured to her plate emphatically, that doofy grin on his face again. “You’ve got your sweet half with the fruit and then savory with the chicken... I’m impressed.”

She blinked, at a loss for words, not expecting his enthusiasm. “Okay. Wow. Are you going to let me eat it or should I let you take a picture first?” The sarcasm came easily, an automatic defense, much preferred to being nice or encouraging. He wasn’t fazed.

“Can I? Take a picture I mean?”

“*Seriously?*”

He pulled his phone out and snapped a picture before she could really react, staring dumbly into his lense. She blinked again, at a loss of how to react to that.

“I want to make that sometime, but I’ll forget it if I don’t take a picture,” he explained, smiling down at his screen. “Cool. Thanks, El.”

“So I can eat now?” She gave him some serious side-eye, frowning as she noticed he’d snapped her face in the picture too.

“Yes, now you can eat,” he grinned back.

She dug in, shoveling the food into her mouth and ignoring him. It was easier than acknowledging him, or having to talk to him. Having to think about it him at all. She’d agreed to be friends with him, but the pressure Max had been putting on her lately made her want to just walk away. Even now her friend was staring at her from across the table, looking smug. El rolled her eyes and shoved another bite into her mouth. She wasn’t going to play this game right now.

“I think we need to do a marathon.”

It had gone quiet as everyone ate—and Lucas studied—so Dustin’s announcement came as bit of a surprise. Mike gave him a semi-disgusted look.

“Um, you *know* I don’t run,” he stated.

El inhaled and choked on her waffle, spitting out her bite, and began to cough frantically, reaching for her water bottle. Her eyes were watering and she gasped for air, trying to dislodge the bit of waffle from her windpipe. Fuck, that had been funny and unexpected, but now her lungs hurt.

*Damn it, Mike.*

“Woah, El, are you okay?” Mike asked, reaching over and giving her back a few gentle taps, trying to help. Of course he was trying to help. As if it wasn’t all his fault.

“Do I—” she coughed again, “—*look* okay?!”

“Drink your water, Ellie,” Max said, pushing the bottle towards her friend.

“That doesn’t help, the food is in her trachea, not her esophagus, she just has to cough it out.”

“God, Mike, is now really the time to get all technical?”

“I’m trying to help!”



El coughed so hard her lungs ached and then finally managed to gasp in enough breath that the burning stopped. She drank some water anyways, wanting to soothe her now aching throat.

“Shit,” she croaked. “That sucked.”

“You should try not choking on your food,” Mike suggested and was pelted by a piece of bacon from Max’s side of the table. “Hey, I’m just being honest!”

“I choked because I was laughing at your stupid joke!” El shot back with a glare.

“I’ll try to be less hysterical,” he said dryly and the two glared at each other for a moment.

Lucas glanced up from his study guide and looked between them, reading the tension in the air.

“Can you two go do that somewhere else? You’re getting sexual tension all over the table,” he drawled, casually looking back at his paper.

Both of them turned complimentary shades of pink and red, looking at each other and then at Lucas with matchings expressions of embarrassed outrage.

“What?! Lucas no we’re not—”

“Ew, gross, dude, what are you—”

They both started protesting at once and Lucas flinched at the onslaught, holding up his hands in surrender. What a reaction.

“Eesh, fine. Have it your way,” he couldn’t be bothered to care, still focused on his study guide, “but when I’m right I don’t want to hear about it.”

“Why are you like this?” Mike asked, putting his head in his hands.

El focused back on her food, eating more quietly, not in the mood to talk anymore. Someone always had to make it awkward. She cleared

her throat, still a bit winded from her episode. She risked a glance at Mike.

*Why is does he have to be so fucking hilarious? I'm trying not to like him more than I do,* she complained to her own mind.

"So anyways," Dustin had been surprisingly quiet during the drama, "like I was saying before Eleven almost *died*, we should do a marathon. A *movie* marathon," he clarified, shooting Mike a look. "I was thinking a trilogy. We could Star Wars originals or prequels—"

"I'm not staring at Jar-Jar Binks for another three hours, Dustin," Lucas complained.

"—or if you would ever let me fucking *finish a sentence*," he shot Lucas a look, "we could do Lord of the Rings. Extended editions, of course."

"That adds on like an extra hour to each two and half hour movie. We'd be up all night," Mike butted in. "That's a big commitment."

"Yeah, man, that's what makes it fun."

El perked up at the mention of Lord of the Rings. After hearing about how great they movies were, she was finally starting to break down, wanting to see for herself how they compared to the books and even though she didn't want to be interested in anything going on at that moment, she couldn't help but feel a shiver of excitement. Mike noticed her apparent interest and let out a heavy sigh, nodding but pretending to be very reluctant.

"Fine, I'll do it. But only because you'll do it anyways and since we live in the same *room* I might as well be a part of planning it. You in, Lucas?"

"Dude, I can't. Have you seen my syllabus for Nonlinear Dynamics and Waves? I'm going to fucking die this semester."

"Have fun with that. I'll text Will and ask him," he pulled out his phone and then looked up at Max. "I'm assuming you're going to be there?"

The redhead nodded. “Yeah, me and Eleven will be there.”

“Woah, hey, I didn’t agree—” El immediately began to protest... but weakly.

“Oh shut up, you mentioned you wanted to see them anyways. Extended edition is best. You’ll be there.” Max didn’t let it be a question, turning to look at Mike. “She’ll be there. Plan on it.”

El tried not to look pleased, nonchalantly taking another bite and shrugging instead. A movie night? Of one of her favorite book series ever? With the cute guy who—

*Nope, she bit her lip, not going there, not now, not ever.*

“God, fine, but it better be like a Friday night. I’m not missing classes or skipping homework for some dumb movies,” she grumped, feeling excited but hiding it by taking another bite of chicken and waffles, savoring the flavor.

“They’re not dumb...” Dustin looked hurt but Max handed him another piece of bacon and he cheered up a bit. “I mean, all movies are kind of dumb, but these are a masterpiece. You’ll see,” he told her confidently, munching on the bacon.

“So... which Friday?” Mike asked, still trying to pin it all down.

“What about this Friday? Before the homework piles too high?” Max suggested and Dustin nodded agreeably.

“Sure,” El shrugged.

Mike’s phone buzzed and he looked down at it, brow furrowing as he typed a response. There was a *shoop!* sound as he received a reply and he half-frowned.

“Will can’t this weekend, his brother is visiting, but he says he just watched them over break anyways and doesn’t mind if we do it without him...” He glanced around, checking reactions to see if that was favorable and almost everyone nodded.

El mentally screamed. She’d been hoping that with Will there it

wouldn't be another glaringly obvious attempt to get her and Mike coupled off, since Max and Dustin would be cuddling the whole time. But apparently she'd have to try and watch the movies while Max attempted to push her onto Mike. She couldn't stifle a groan.

"Why are you disappointed?" Lucas asked, noticing her sigh.

She blinked at him. "I like Will."

"You know he's gay, right?"

"Oh my god," she felt like punching something, her frustration at the expectation of romance at every turn pushing her over the edge. "Why does everyone assume the word 'like' means something romantic? Am I not allowed to like people as friends? Do *you* like people as friends or are you trying to hit on everyone you've ever talked to?" She was on a roll now, shooting Lucas an annoyed glare. "Will is *cool*, I actually consider him a friend. Unlike you. What was your name again? Do I even *know* you?"

There was an audible gasp from the others and they stared between the two with wide eyes. Nobody ever really talked to Lucas like that, he was notorious for going off if you rubbed him the wrong way and El had just been painfully condescending. And rude. But she didn't care, she was sick and tired of everyone expecting something from her that she didn't even want to care about. It was quiet for a moment as Lucas set his study guide down, staring across the table at the small, brunette girl who had her arms crossed, daring him to say something, eyes glowering at him. He broke out into a huge grin.

"I'm Lucas, which I'm guessing you didn't actually not know since we met last semester but—" He nodded slowly. "I respect your way of thinking and also how you don't put up with anyone's shit. That's cool." He glanced at Mike and that shit-eating grin came back. "You better marry her or I just might, dude."

"*Lucas*," Mike warned, turning scarlet.

El looked at Lucas like he was a gross, hairy bug. "Ew, I'm not marrying anyone. Ever. *Especially* not you."

"Yeah, you're funny. We should definitely be friends," Lucas smiled wider. "I don't think I know anyone who's actually funny."

"Hey!" Dustin and Mike protested at the same time.

Her phone, which had been sitting on the table, started buzzing and the tentative smile on her face vanished as she looked down at the screen. *Martin Brenner*, it read and she felt her stomach clench as she picked it up, immediately hopping out of her seat and walking towards the exit of the cafeteria as she answered, ignoring the curious glances that followed her from her table.

"Hello, Papa."

"Jane, I have wonderful news."

She broke out in a sweat. That never actually meant good news. "Oh?"

"Yes, I have a colleague at the college who's arranged for you to have dinner with one of the local hospital's Chief of Surgery this Friday evening. It would help to get your foot in the door there and if you make a good impression I'm sure he'll write you a good letter of recommendation for John Hopkins."

Shit, this Friday? She'd just agreed to go to the movie night... and she realized she wanted to go. Really badly. Bad enough to challenge him.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to keep her tone steady. "Papa, I-I can't." She winced at her stutter.

A long pause.

"And why is that?" His voice was like ice and she flinched.

"I-I have tutoring that night. For my A&P lab."

"With who?"

"Um..." She picked the first person who came to mind, the one who had been floating around her mind and who was also conveniently

some who could actually help her. “Max’s boyfriend’s roommate. He’s a TA for the class and a junior, so he’s already taken it. He said he’d do it for free.”

“That’s awfully generous,” his voice landed on the “s” sound, drawing it out and making him sound like a snake.

“Yeah... he said because I was Max’s friend he’d help out. Friday is the only night he can meet and there’s this quiz over the bones in the skull next week—”

“And all that is more important than this opportunity?” The ice was back.

“Um... I just don’t want to fail. I really think this will help. I’d feel more confident about it.”

“You won’t fail,” he commanded, then paused. “But I’ll allow it since it’s *free* .” He spat the word out like it tasted bad. “Next time you hire a tutor, make sure to tell me first.”

“Y-Yes, Papa.”

“I have to go.”

He hung up the usual way and she let herself take a deep breath, feeling so stupidly relieved she could have cried. Then she looked down at the phone in her hands, not believing that he’d bought her lie *again*. She was getting good at this. A laugh bubbled of her throat and she almost did a happy dance, lost in the good feeling.

“What’s with the face?”

She whipped around and there was Mike, holding his backpack over his shoulder and finishing a string cheese stick. Staring up at his face she realized she needed him to actually tutor her and immediately frowned, wondering if that was actually a good idea. Would he even want to? It would make the lie easier if the it was true but... spending time alone? With *him*? There was no way it as a good idea.

He noticed the change of expression and reached up to scratch the back of his neck nervously.

“Um, sorry I—”

“I need you to tutor me.” She blurted, not caring for an apology. “For the A&P lab. You’re the TA, right?”

His brow furrowed. “Um, yeah I am, how did you know—”

“It said it when I registered. Unless you’re not Michael E. Wheeler?”

He looked stunned. “No, you’re right. How do you know my last—”

“Max told me,” she interrupted yet again.

“Okay, why do you need me to tutor you?”

“Because *my* stupid ass just told my adopted not-dad that you were tutoring me Friday nights so that way I don’t have to go to some stupid dinner with a stuffy old guy who runs a hospital I don’t care about and can watch Lord of the Rings instead.” She took a deep breath after her rant and then looked away nervously. “I can pay you. Not much, um, but I’ll—”

This time he was the one who interrupted, looking bemused.

“You lied to your scary... not-dad? To watch movies?”

“I love Lord of the Rings,” she admitted, flushing brightly, “I read them every year. I want to see the movies.”

He blinked at her, mouth gaping open at her confession. But then a strange understanding washed over him and she watched as clarity filled his previously confused eyes. Apparently he’d come to some sort of decision.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll start tutoring you if you want *but*—” she flinched at the *but*, expecting some sort of stipulation—what did he want? Money? Favors? A *date*?—and he cleared his throat awkwardly, “I refuse to let you pay me. *If*—you watch Lord of the Rings in its entirety *and* read them the same time I do so I can actually have an intelligent conversation about them with someone other than Dustin. Because he’s great and nerdy but he’s busy with his girlfriend and I’m getting desperate to talk about it with someone.?”

“That’s it?” Her shoulders relaxed. Easy.

“That’s it,” he said simply.

She paused, trying to think of the pros and cons of what he was offering. Pros: Not completely lying to Papa, actually getting tutored and not failing the class, for free, watching movies, talking about her favorite book series, hanging out with Mike. Cons: She had to hang out with Mike *and* talk to him.

Was it a con? He liked her, she knew that, and she liked him, she was pretty sure, and that meant things could get complicated if she wasn’t careful. But she was always careful... Usually. Would she be able to be careful? Her emotions battled on her face and after a moment Mike slumped a bit.

“El,” his voice was soft, face understanding if not a bit disappointed, and she felt a stray butterfly tickle her stomach. “You don’t have to, I’ll still help you out if you think I’m being totally weird and annoying. It was kind of just an... incentive, I guess. But you don’t have to, I won’t make you talk to me.”

God, why did he have to be *nice* and *kind* and so fucking *understanding*? And he kept calling her that nickname, that one that made her want blush and giggle like a damned schoolgirl. There was barely hidden hurt in his eyes and she once again felt the need to make him feel better. She swallowed heavily, hoping she didn’t regret the choice she was about to make.

“You have yourself a deal, Michael E. Wheeler,” she said resolutely, sticking out her hand to him.

He looked down at it and blinked, like he couldn’t quite believe that she was agreeing, but then a broad grin stretched across his face and he reached out, taking her frigid hand in his warm one, giving it a firm shake.

“Alright, cool.” He was still shaking. “That’s a promise on my part. I’ll make sure you pass that class.”

“I don’t make promises... but I’ll try.” They were still shaking hands



and she coughed pontedly. "Um, you can let go of my hand now."

"S-Sorry!"

He dropped her hand and retracted his, shoving it into the pocket of the oversized hoodie he was wearing. He had his backpack on and she realized he was probably heading somewhere, glancing at her phone to check the time.

"Oh, shit, I'm late for Computer Apps," she glanced at him guiltily. "Aren't you going to be late for something too?"

"Yeah, um, I was going to head to my Rhetoric class but you looked like you needed to talk to someone so..." he shrugged like it was no big deal and she frowned at him, suddenly annoyed that he would do that sort of thing. They were barely friends.

"Stop being nice to me if it's going to make you late," she huffed. "Like that's not cool."

"It's not a big deal—" he protested.

"Mike." She shook her head. "Don't do that. Don't treat me... special, okay? I'm not some delicate flower that needs constant sunshine to feel okay about herself. I've managed alone for a while," she didn't know why she was so defensive but she didn't like that he would let himself get in trouble for her sake. "I'm not worth getting yourself into shit for."

"I wasn't trying to... sorry." He winced. "I just don't want you to feel sad or something, I mean it seems like you've dealt with that enough."

There was *pity* in his voice, as plain as the twisted grimace on his face. It hit her, just what he meant, and she felt herself go scarlet with anger.

"What the fuck does that mean?" she bristled.

"Um, well, your arms..." he gestured shallowly, "you know, the—the scars?"

He looked nervous and as her face turned a violent shade of purple he paled, realizing he'd said the wrong thing. And he had. Boy, had he said the wrong thing.

"Do *not* pretend like you know me just because you saw my fucking scars," she hissed, more pissed than she'd been in weeks, "I don't need your *pity* or your stupid assumptions, so *fuck off!*"

She turned around and stomped away from him, heading towards her dorm room, skipping class for the first time ever because *damn it all* if she was going to let anyone on this stupid college campus see her cry. People dodged out of her way, staring as she careened past them, her long blue skirt billowing out behind her.

The further she went the worst she felt, anger turning to remorse. Why had she yelled at him? He really was just trying to be nice. She had overreacted as usual.

*But he mentioned your scars.*

Of course he did, who wouldn't? They riddled her skin from wrist to elbow, ankle to thigh, covering her stomach and hips, tiny ugly reminders of the darkness she'd barely overcome—of the darkness that still hovered over her like a cloud. The darkness that embraced her so easily in moments like this.

There was another girl in the elevator and El tilted her chin up, biting her lip, refusing to let the tears fall until she was alone. The elevator dinged at her floor and she flew down the hallway, hands shaking as she shoved her key into the lock, barely making it inside before the sob left her throat. She slammed the door behind her and leaned against it, sliding down until she was on the floor, sobbing into her hands so hard it felt like her lungs would fall out.

*Why am I such a bitch? He won't want to talk to me ever again now. I'm so stupid, why did I say that? Why did I do that? I fucking hate myself.*

It was the usual mantra, beating her down until she couldn't breath.

*I hate myself, I hate myself, I hate myself, I hate myself, I hate myself, I hate myself...*

&&&

Max found her there a few hours later, curled up into a ball in front of the door, tears slowly leaking from her eyes. The floor was cold but she hadn't been able to move, completely catatonic. With a gasp her best friend squeezed into the room, getting down onto her knees next to her, gently reaching out.

"Ellie? Eleven?" Her hands were so gentle, carefully moving her into an upright position. "Is it really bad this time?"

El could only snuffle and nod.

"Do you want to talk about it yet?"

She shook her head frantically, unable meet her friend's eyes.

"Okay. Let me help you, do you want to get into bed?"

"Y-yes," she whispered back.

Max was strong from the years of little league and football and skateboarding, strong enough to haul her tiny friend upright and help move her towards her bed. El had the bottom bunk, thankfully, and Max pulled the covers back, making the smaller girl sit and then bending down to take off her shoes, looking up at her empty, tear-stained eyes.

"Do you want pajamas?"

"Yes."

Helping her change was a little more difficult but they managed like they always did. Soon enough El was tucked under the covers, curled up tightly as Max rubbed her back over the covers, trying to lull her to sleep. El closed her eyes and took a deep breath, feeling better, feeling safe. The exhaustion of the panic attack hit and she sighed, tucking her face further into her pillow.

"Max?"

"Yeah?"

“Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Ellie. You know that.”

“I know...”

El shifted a bit, feeling painfully grateful.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Ellie.”

Max got up and turned off the light in the room, grabbing her laptop and climbing onto the top bunk. She was the only person in the entire world that El had ever said that to and meant it. El knew that without her she wouldn’t be alive. If Max hadn’t found her in the tub before—

“Ellie?”

“Hm?”

“Does it have something to do with Mike?”

She didn’t want to answer but did, knowing lying wouldn’t help.  
“...Yes.”

“Okay.”

For once she didn’t push and El felt her heart swell with affection for her strong, tomboyish, loyal best friend who never tired of her and took care of her without question.

*What did I do to deserve her?*

The thought followed her as she finally fell asleep.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

i have a best friend like max kind of. she's my cousin actually, and i love her more than i can put into words. i wouldn't be the same without her and i'm so grateful.

sorry again, enough about me.

i don't yet have an estimate on how long this story is going to be, chapter wise. i'd like to say maybe twenty but... i'm not sure yet. it's going to be stupidly long tho, i can already tell. i hope you won't mind.

let me know what you thought. i love to hear from you all.

-g

## 4. I bend but don't break

### Notes for the Chapter:

trigger warning: mentions of cutting and descriptions of wounds

be safe, friends. it's a hard journey and i don't want to bring back things for any of you who might have struggled with self-harm or maybe still do. it's nothing too graphic, but it's there, so please take care of yourselves.

we're getting some flashbacks to el and max in high school. some explanations.

when i was a little girl i wanted to be a ballerina. you'll see part of that reflected here because i have stupid amount of knowledge about ballets and stories and dances and just... yeah.

okay enough spoilers. have an extra long chapter.

The next two days passed by in a blur as El functioned on autopilot, her brain shutting down all processes that weren't necessary. That's how it always was after she had an attack, her mind shut down as it tried to cope and return to "normal". Her body went through the motions, walking to lectures, shoveling down the food Max put in front of her, frantically typing the notes in lectures and then curling up in bed after finishing her homework. She slept a lot, the quiet darkness so much easier than the anxiety that wanted to drag her down again. The thoughts filling her mind, making her think about about *one* person.

She hadn't seen him since.

Max had yet to say anything about it, other than establishing that he did in fact have something to do with it. She knew her friend needed her to time process before she could begin to explain, had to sort and sleep and just breathe. It had always been that way, since they were

ten.

Back then El was violent, fighting anyone who dared to even look at her wrong, so full of anger and bitterness that it overflowed into her tiny fists. In high school it had morphed into a silent black cloud that she sunk into, only surfacing to do as she was told by Papa. Pass the classes, get the good grades, smile and wear the pretty dress when necessary and go to the dinner party. But underneath she was drowning, her unhealthy coping mechanisms and Max's companionship the only things that kept her grounded.

Even Max hadn't know about the cutting for a while. Eleven never wore short-shorts, opting for jeans and dark shirts, sweaters, hoodies, leggings or long black dresses, slowly letting the darkness inside of her cover her on the outside too. She wore bracelets and cuffs and sweatbands as accessories, things with long sleeves, nobody blinking an eye, nobody thinking that she might be covering something up. It was just a style change, that usual angsty teenager phase. Nothing serious, right?

Max discovered the truth when they were fifteen.

She stayed at Eleven's every weekend and most of the week too, the tension in her family at home made the large Brenner estate a haven, since her father was out of town on business trips most of the time anyways. Technically she wasn't allowed to stay over, but Eleven was rebellious at that point, and needy, not wanting to be alone as much as she pretended to be. They pretended that Max just hung out there a lot, but the maid and housekeeper kept quiet about it and Papa stayed mostly content, thinking everything was how he liked it. And it was nice to get away from the sounds of screaming and breaking glass and slamming.

Home became where she felt safest... and that was when she was with her best friend.

Back then Eleven had taken to changing in the bathroom, which was kind of weird but Max didn't really notice, it was more like her friend would disappear and then reappear in different clothes. But she'd needed to brush her teeth and figured Eleven was just peeing or something, so she'd trotted into the bathroom without knocking, her

toothbrush in her hand. It wasn't weird.

Her toothbrush hit the ground and she stared in shock at her friend who was standing in front of the mirror in her underwear. There were angry red lines across the top of her thighs, trailing down her legs, a few still seeping blood. Eleven had whipped around, outrage crossing her face, trying to cover herself with her hands.

"Max!" She had sounded guilty. And afraid "I told you to—"

"Eleven, what are you *doing*?" Max gasped, spotting a razor on the back of the toilet. The dots connected.

"None of your business, get out!" Eleven's face was red with anger.

"But you're blee—"

"*Don't*. Don't, Max."

They had stared at each other for a second and then the tears had come and Max was kneeling in front of Eleven as she sat on the fluffy toilet cover, dabbing at the cuts with a tissue and applying neosporin. She didn't say anything. What was there to say? It was obvious what was happening, what the pressure Papa was putting on his adopted-daughter was doing to her.

"How long? Have you been... doing this?" She couldn't make herself say it and Eleven ducked her head, looking ashamed.

"F-Four months. After the recital..." she'd whispered. "It's the only thing that makes me feel like I'm not crazy."

"You're not crazy, Ellie," Max whispered.

She hadn't replied.

It had taken a bit to piece together the story exactly, but Max knew what she meant by "the recital".

Ballet. Eleven been in classes since pre-K and she was *good*, her petite frame and long limbs moving her gracefully across the floor. It was like floating, like speaking without words. She had loved it and it



showed, part natural talent, part dedication and practice. Despite the darkness inside of her and the stress of her home life, she could still make *something* beautiful. It had been enough to keep her from falling over that edge into the black hole that tried to consume her.

Even though *he* didn't approve.

Her skill had landed her the lead in her local ballet company's production of *Giselle*, the story of a lovestruck girl whose lover unwittingly betrays her. Distraught, she dances herself into madness, exerting herself so badly she dies in the arms of the man she loved. She returns as a Wili, the vengeful spirits of girls betrayed before they married, who scour the forest for men to torture, dancing with them until they die. Her lover visits her grave and begs forgiveness and she breaks free from her Wili sisters, her love overpowering the need for revenge. She protects him until sunrise—when the Wilis are forced to flee—leaving him with a farewell kiss as she returns to her grave, finally at peace.

It was a tragedy but Eleven had adored playing the role of Giselle, first happy and carefree, then hysterical and heartbroken, and finally a forgiving spirit of love.

Everything had been perfect, she'd learned her dances, flowing with the music. The production had required her to cancel several of her other lessons and miss parts of school, which Papa hadn't been happy with. He'd enrolled her in ballet to help her learn good posture and how to move gracefully, not for her to actually become a ballerina. He had other plans for her future.

On opening night he'd been there, in the front row of course, and for the first act she'd ignored him, too wrapped up in the story. But during the second act, when Giselle appears in front of her lover, Albrecht, that she let herself look into the audience.

Papa was there, the bright light of the scene illuminating his face. He had looked *bored*, covertly covering a yawn as their eyes met. He'd shook his head no, almost imperceptibly, and her heart dropped to the floor. Not even giving her all could convince him this was something she could be allowed to love. Her ankle shook, her concentration broken and then she'd fallen, crying out as the joint

twisted unnaturally.

The production had come to a halt, Eleven rushed to the doctor who told her she had strained a tendon and would have to be off her foot for the next six weeks. Her understudy was called, everyone sending flowers to her house, but she disappeared for two weeks. Even Max couldn't get a hold of her—she'd skipped school—and then finally she reappeared, holding a crutch and looking... empty. Like she couldn't see colors anymore.

She'd quit ballet soon afterwards.

After that she hadn't been the same, but Max hadn't realized just how badly the incident had affected her until she'd found the cuts. She promised herself to try and to pay more attention to Eleven, almost moving into her house, trying to keep her from being alone. Max had been afraid.

It had almost worked, but not enough. Nothing could keep the sadness away, the black hole that had opened in Eleven's chest, that told her she wasn't good enough. Not even her best friend could save her from the sadness that consumed her, that made her just want to d  
—

"Ellie? Are you listening?"

El blinked, Max's voice bringing her back from the past.

"Sorry, what did you say?"

"I asked if you still wanted to go tonight. Over to Dustin's for the Lord of the Rings marathon?"

So far she'd felt numb, but the reminder sent a wave of panic through her and she opened her eyes wide, staring her friend.

"I-I can't." She shook her head, almost trembling, blurting out the fear that had been quietly eating at her. "He *hates* me."

Max raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

El bit her lip, trying to breath, knowing it was time to admit it.

"M-Mike," she whispered.

"Why do you think he hates you?"

"Because I... at mini golf he helped me up and he saw my arms and then he was being so *nice* and I asked why—" She shook her head, feeling tears burning at her eyes. "A-And he m-mentioned my scars —"

"And you nearly ripped his head off?" Max didn't look surprised, but her face cleared of worry, like she was coming to some realization, nodding thoughtfully. "So that's why he asked if you were okay..."

"What?" El sniffled.

"We have badminton together—did I tell you that? He's terrible, it's hilarious. Anyways we partnered up for doubles in class yesterday and he asked if you were okay. Just kind of in passing as I saved us from losing the match. I wasn't sure how he knew you *weren't* okay but... that makes so much sense..."

"He didn't... say I was a total bitch? That he hated my guts?" El was struggling to believe that the horrible picture of hatred she'd painted in her mind wasn't actually true. How could he not be mad at her? She'd totally reamed him.

"Um, no, not even close. He seemed really worried, like he knew you were having one of your episodes. But I didn't tell anyone, not even Dustin, so I wasn't sure how he could know."

There was a pause as El stared down at her hands, fiddling with the edges of the long-sleeved, pink sweater she was wearing. It was one of her favorites, the fabric soft like a kitten with a big, black sequin bow across the front. The gesture felt comforting, and she took a deep breath, the knowledge that he wasn't going to be disgusted by her making her less afraid of the idea.

Max was watching her, reading her body language. She didn't want to push, but she could tell this was important.

"I think you should come, Ellie. Avoiding him won't help anything... and you said you wanted to watch the movies. I promise Dustin and I

won't be gross, and if you want to leave, we can. I'll come back with you too."

El finally looked over at her friend, biting her lip but nodding.

"Okay."

She wanted to apologize to him if she had the chance. He probably didn't want to tutor her anymore or talk about Lord of the Rings, but at the very least she could tell him she was sorry for blowing up at him. That hadn't been fair and she knew that. Her emotions, the depression and anxiety, they were the reasons *why* she acted like she did... but they weren't excuses and she wasn't okay with treating him the way she did. She tried to take responsibility for that, like she hadn't in the past. It was all she *could* do.

"Okay?"

"Yeah... I'll come."

Max grinned, pleasantly surprised. "Awesome, Ellie. I'll let Dustin know we'll be over in a bit."

They left a half hour later, clutching a bag of Doritos, two liters of pop, and some Oreos. Max had said they would enjoy it more if they weren't starving and El trusted her. Her stomach was shivering, her insides like jello, but she tried to fight it, knowing it was just stupid nerves. Stupid nerves that didn't need to exist because it was just Mike. And he wasn't supposed to make her feel anything. That was the deal she'd made.

*Once I apologize I'll feel better*, she told herself.

Her legs shook as they walked over, the anxiety almost unbearable, but she gritted her teeth and pushed through. It was just Dustin and Mike. They were friends—he wasn't mad. And Max was there, everything would be fine. It would be fine.

Dustin opened the door with his usual grin and let them in but the second El walked in, she locked eyes with Mike and froze. Max noticed before Dustin did and she grabbed her boyfriend and hauled him out of the room.

"Babe, I, uh, need to show you something," she told him as she gave El a look and then shut the door, leaving the two alone.

Mike was sitting in his chair at his desk, eyebrows raised, like he wanted to say something or start the conversation but clearly had no idea what to do. El remembered what she'd told herself earlier, what she needed to do. Explain that she was sorry and hadn't meant it and what had made her act like that. But the nerves overwhelmed the common sense.

"I'm sorry," she blurted, the only thing that managed to come out.

"Um," he looked confused. "For what?"

She suddenly felt a little outraged. She'd only felt cripplingly guilty about yelling at him for two days and had dealt with a panic attack because of him. The least he could do was be mad at her for being a bitch. She frowned at him.

"For like... ripping your fucking head off on Wednesday. Outside of the caf?" She tried to jog his memory.

"Oh, that? You don't have to be sorry... I definitely crossed a line. I should be apologizing to you, really," He winced guiltily. "I have this habit of getting nosey when I care about someone but it's really not cool for me to just assume things about you. Sorry for being rude. I won't, um, mention that again."

She blinked, completely stunned by his admittance of wrongdoing. How many people willingly took the blame for this kind of thing? Usually they told her she was crazy or stupid or psycho. As if she didn't already know. But her mind was stuck on something else he'd said, something that lit her up like a Christmas tree, making her chest warm.

*He said he cares about you.*

"Oh, um, well yeah, don't worry about it. I overreacted, honestly, so I'm sorry about that," she shrugged off his apology, trying to ignore how suddenly beautiful everything seemed.

"You're forgiven. I'll be less obnoxious too, how about that?"

"Yeah, okay," she agreed.

He was grinning that broad smile that overtook his face and her heart leapt up, making her smile back softly. She opened her mouth to say something nice—something she would regret later probably—but the door opened again and Dustin strutted in, looking smug. His hair was all kerfluffed and his hat was askew, lips swollen. Max came in behind him, looking equally disheveled and El realized her friend had distracted her boyfriend by making out with him in the hallway—which was admittedly kind of overly PDA-ish and gross—so she and Mike could have a moment of privacy.

*I don't deserve you*, she told her bestie with her eyes.

*I know*, Max's quirked eyebrow said back.

They giggled before setting their food on Dustin's sloppy, taco-wrapper covered desk. Max grabbed the Doritos and climbed onto the top bunk, which was Dustin's. He joined her and El glanced at the bottom bunk, wanting to get comfy but not about to snuggle up on Mike's bed without asking first. She wasn't willing to go up top even though her palms were sweating at the thought of being so close to him. And it was much more appealing than Dustin's lumpy mattress, made neatly, with a dark blue plaid comforter and an extra blanket thrown across the bottom. It looked *cozy*.

He was sitting on it sideways, with his back against the wall, and he noticed her look of longing, scooting over easily.

"Hey, if you bring those Oreos over here, I'll let you share my bed," he said playfully, diffusing her awkwardness with ease. "Unless you want to jump up top with them?"

El shuddered and stepped towards him, "No no, I don't mind sharing with you."

She sat a solid three feet away from him, setting the Oreos between them. Personal space was important, especially now that she was close enough to see every freckle on his face.

*Cute*, she blinked, then quickly looked away, opening the box of

cookies.

"You want a pillow for your back?" He handed one to her. "This wall gets stupidly uncomfortable after the second hour of the movie."

"Oh, yeah, thanks."

She tucked it behind her back, appreciating the softness against her spine. It smelled of him, like Old Spice body spray and laundry detergent, clean and warm and soft and oddly comforting. She tried not to be too obvious as she took a deep breath, feeling every muscle relax. Dustin started the first movie from up above and she settled in, crossing her legs and occasionally reaching for an Oreo.

After the first twenty minutes she leaned over towards Mike, whispering. It was good, but they'd skipped a whole chapter of the book.

"Did they cut out Tom Bombadil?"

"Yeah, sort of. They combine him with Treebeard later on. It works better than it sounds, I promise," he murmured back, stooping closer to her, breath tickling her ear.

"But they put in Farmer Maggot." She almost didn't notice how close he was. Almost. "And the mushrooms!"

"Haha, I know, right? They got some really good details in there," he grinned.

The next few hours went like that. She would point out something from the book or ask if they left something out and he would answer or grin at her excitement. They took a bathroom break after the first movie ended and El turned to look at him, eyes wide as Max flipped on a light.

"The Balrog. That was... I never imagined it like that but it was *perfect*. And whoever plays Aragorn is so spot-on. Canon Aragorn. I'm a little in love with him," she gushed.

"Oh, Viggo Mortensen? He's honestly perfectly cast. He actually learned Elvish and even wrote a song in it he sings in Return of the

King. Oh! And he breaks his toe in the next one kicking a helmet, I'll tell you when, it's funny because they kept it in so his yell is real..."

He fed her bits of trivia about the movie the whole way through and she laughed, feeling so at ease she forgot she'd been paralyzingly anxious before. Being with Mike was just so... easy and calming and fun. Usually interacting with people tired her out and made her cranky, but he made her feel energetic and damn near *bubbly*. She'd never been bubbly in her entire life. It was weird but not totally unwelcome.

She had scooted closer to him without even realizing it, so they could whisper during the movie more easily, and as the hours ticked by and the Oreos disappeared, she started to yawn. Not because the movies were boring—she was completely enthralled by Eowyn's badassery and the battle of Helm's Deep—but by the time they started the third movie it was almost three in the morning. And she'd been so emotionally stressed that relief made her exhausted.

Dustin was snoring above them and El could hear Max's familiar, wheezy breathing, meaning they'd both fallen asleep. Mike ended up getting up and putting in the final movie, the only one who didn't seem fazed by the late hour. He stretched, his long limbs twisting comically as he tried to shake the tiredness out. She hid a smile, admiring him a bit, the broadness of his shoulders and the way his nose wrinkled when he yawned.

*He's like, cute but also kind of hot*, she admitted. *Weird*.

"You ready for the last one? The Battle of Pelennor Fields is *such* an incredible scene. They have the oliphaunts and Legolas takes one *down*. All CGI, but I mean... it still looks good," he plopped down next to her, his arm brushing hers.

She didn't flinch away like she normally would, nodding and hiding another yawn.

"Fuck yeah," she pulled her knees to her chest. "As long as it's good CGI."

The story picked back up immediately but despite her earnest



interest, her eyelids kept drifting closed. She would jerk awake every few seconds, trying to focus on the screen, but she was just so *tired* and *comfy* and—

Her head plopped onto his shoulder and she slumped against him as she gave in, the exhaustion finally winning. She didn't see the smile that quirked his lips, didn't feel the feather-soft kiss he brushed against the top of her hair, didn't realize what she was doing.

She was asleep.

&&&

There was something warm under her cheek, something breathing, and she jolted upright so fast her head cracked against the underside of the bunkbed above her.

“Ow!”

She grabbed the top of her head and rubbed the spot, feeling pissed at herself for being stupid enough to hit her head. Next to her, something stirred with a sigh and she looked down, blinking the blurry, leftover sleepiness from her eyes. She startled again, almost smacking her head for a second time.

There was a blanket across her legs and she was still in her clothes, yesterday's mascara making her eyes feel sticky. But it was *who* was next to her that made her heart rate skyrocket.

It was Mike, who was pouting as he slowly woke up too. He'd been lying slumped onto his side, head resting on the bed, the blanket across her lap also in his, like he'd tried to cover them. She realized she must have fallen asleep on him and he'd fallen asleep too, falling over so she was resting half on his chest, half on his side.

His arm was still around her waist, hand resting gently on her hip, and her face was suddenly three hundred degrees hotter than usual.

“Mike,” she whispered, not wanting to startle him but also wanting to extract herself from his arms. “Hey, wake up.”

She poked him in the side and he groan-whimpered, trying to snuggle

back into the pillow, his arm subconsciously pulling her closer. She yelped softly as he almost pulled her into his *lap*.

“Mike!”

“What?” he groaned, sleepily blinking and turning his head to look at her.

His eyes suddenly shot open and he bolted upright, smacking his head on the bunkbed and yelping, reaching for his head and pulling his arm away from her waist.

“Ouch, *fuck*,” he groaned, rubbing his forehead.

It was already turning red and while she felt empathetic she also couldn’t hide the laugh that snorted out of her. He gave her a look.

“Why do you only laugh at me when I’m in pain or embarrassed?” he grumped.

“No, it’s funny because—” she was grinning goofily. “I did the exact same thing like thirty seconds ago.”

“Really,” he looked surprised.

She pushed her hair aside and showed him her matching red mark, already a little swollen. He winced in sympathy and rubbed his head again.

“Honestly it’s better than hitting my head on the ceiling. Lucas made me take top bunk last semester and that shit was the worst. I literally put a dent in the ceiling.”

“No you did not,” she said eyes wide as she laughed.

“I did though,” he sighed like he was disappointed and then pouted. “And again with the laughing? Should I call you and tell you every time I trip too? So you can run over and point and laugh?”

Something about the whole situation made her laugh harder and she *cackled*, trying to cover her mouth with her hands and muffle the sound. His eyes widened at the sound that came out of her and then

he was laughing that goofy, snorty laugh at her stupid reaction which only made her laugh harder. They tried to stop, shaking their heads, breathing and hiccuping and then she was *crying* she was laughing so hard.

“Stop,” she gasped between bouts, face hurting from smiling, “I can’t breathe!”

“You started it!”

She reached over and poked his side playfully, like she usually did when she and Max were like this, and he jumped as she unwittingly hit his ticklish spot. Her eyes widened at her discovery and then both of her hands were tickling him as he laughed and snorted and begged her to stop, trying to grab her wrists and make her quit as she enacted revenge for him making her laugh so hard.

El didn’t know why she was doing it, but for some reason she didn’t want him to stop laughing, feeling stupidly happy as he finally managed to snag her hands and push her back, so she was halfway underneath him, pinned to the bed. Suddenly she was hyper aware of the feel of his waist against her hips, how small she was in comparison to his lanky frame and how well she fit against him. Something in her suddenly *burned*.

His face was close enough she could feel his breath and all of the oxygen left the room as she stared up into his eyes, twin stars of darkness that were gazing back at her intensely. The laughter slid from their faces as something softer filled the space between them, something that felt *right*. He was closer, closer than she’d realized, their breath mingling, and she was tilting her face up to meet his, eyelashes brushing his cheekbone, wanting to feel—

“What’s so funny down there?”

Dustin’s head appeared upside down, his curly hair hanging down and Mike startled back so quickly he smacked his head *again*.

“*Fuck!* Goddammit, Dustin!” he yelled, reaching for the back of his head and clutching it.

“Shit, sorry!”

Dustin’s eyes were wide and El all but leaped off the bed, pulling her sweater down and blushing furiously, praying he hadn’t seen anything. The last thing she needed was both him *and* Max goading her about dating Mike. Because it wasn’t going to happen. It couldn’t.

Her shoulders were tense and she took a deep breath before turning around, letting herself look at the two on the top bunk. Dustin looked confused but ecstatic, but Max was just waking up, looking down at her roommate.

“Did I miss the movies?” she asked as she yawned.

El managed a smile, trying to fight the panic. “Just a bit, Maxie. It’s okay, we can finish the last one some other time. Um,” she bit her lip, definitely *not* looking at Mike. “I’m going to head back to the room. I’ll see you there later?”

Max frowned, rubbing her eyes. “Wait, Eleven, we could—”

She didn’t *want* to stay and deal with it so she didn’t, grabbing her jacket and phone and walking out of the room before Max could finish her sentence, feeling anxious as she started down the hallway, the reality of just how stupid she’d been becoming clear.

She’d almost kissed Mike. They had been so close and she’d felt so happy and it had been so nice. She had *wanted* to kiss him. In fact... she still did. And that was wrong, that wasn’t part of any plan, that wasn’t how this was supposed to go. She’d told him that sort of thing was off limits and yet...

*Stupid, stupid, stupid*, she screamed. *You’re going to ruin everything.*

Behind her she heard the door open again and shut her eyes as footsteps came jogging after her.

“El, wait—”

Of *course* it was Mike. She whirled, feeling pissed at herself and not trying to hide it. He backed up a step at the glower that darkened her face, clearly thinking she was mad at *him*. Of course not. He’d done

nothing wrong. He'd been... wonderful.

But he couldn't *know* that.

"Um," he bit his lip, shoving his hands into his pockets, "sorry, I—"

"What, Mike? What do you want?" she spat.

Why did he make her so *angry*? It was like every time he was nice it just pissed her off, even when he was apologizing. Why was she mad at him now? It wasn't fair he was so good and sweet and cute. It wasn't fair.

"I just... I'm sorry. For back there. I totally crossed a line and it was uncool of me and I wanted to apologize," he swallowed, his leg jiggling nervously, his whole body a hunched bundle of anxiety.

She opened her mouth but paused, taking him in instead.

His hair was trying to go in forty different directions and there was a streak of dried drool on his chin that he hadn't noticed yet. His jeans and polo shirt were all rumpled and he looked nervous, his brows furrowing his pretty face into a worried question mark. It was look she'd seen, on her own face, and suddenly the fight left her.

"I..." she blinked.

She wasn't mad at *him*, she realized, she was mad at *herself*. He made her feel so happy and safe and so... *something*. And it pissed her off because nobody was supposed to make her feel that way, not even a tall, nerdy junior boy with pretty freckles who was sweet and understanding and looked at her like she was some special edition comic book he'd been wanting his whole life.

No. She couldn't like him. It wasn't *allowed*. She was willing to break most of Papa's rule so she could get ahead of him but this... this was just stupid. A distraction.

"I can't do this, Mike," she shook her head, hands clenching. "I'm sorry, you're really amazing and nice and I wish—"

"You wish?" he interrupted, looking even more confused. "Wait, you

can't do *what*?"

"I wish... I wish we could be friends, really, but I can't. I'm sorry."

Something inside of her was aching, a foreign feeling, and she tried to swallow it down as disappointment and hurt and genuine sadness flooded his face. It wasn't fair, any of it. Especially not that.

He licked his lips, brow furrowing. "Why not?"

"Because I *like* you too much!" she burst out, face flushing. "I... I can't date you. I want to be your friend and talk to you about Lord of the Rings and waffles and 80's music but... I can't, Mike," she looked down at the shitty hallway carpet. "I'm sorry."

It was quiet and she waited for him to get mad, to tell her she was a stupid tease and a terrible person and liar, the things she was telling herself in her head. But it was quiet and she heard a resigned sigh instead.

"Okay, um... that's fair, I guess," he mumbled. "I mean, you said you didn't want to date anyone and I said I was okay with that. Myself included."

She looked up at him, surprised, and then winced at the hurt on his face. *Fuck, I was trying to not hurt in the first place*, she swore. But clearly he was going to hurt anyways and she tried to tell herself it was better now when they were friends then later on if they'd become something more. Which would never happen, she wouldn't even allow it to be a thought.

With a nod, she turned to go, but his voice stopped her, his gaze lifting from the floor. He looked determined.

"I'll just be your tutor, then. Or just Dustin's roommate, even. Whatever you want to call me so we're not—"

"Wait, you're not still—you can't tutor me," she blinked.

"Um, yeah I am, I promised to help you pass that class," he crossed his arms across his chest, jaw setting stubbornly. "Look, I won't be your friend or annoy you or whatever, but... you have to let me keep

my promise. I'll keep my distance, I swear. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable but if you fail this class *I'm* going to feel bad and I don't want to feel bad either."

Common sense told her that was a bad idea. A very bad idea. She should just cut him out entirely, let him fade into the sea of nothingness that was the majority of the student body. Let him be nothing again. But... he'd said he never broke promises. And she did need to pass the class. It would just be the TA helping a student, a totally normal thing, and besides... she kind of owed him this one after yelling at him... twice? Three times?

"Okay," she exhaled and nodded, trying to be casual. "Are Friday evenings still fine with you?"

"Yeah, after dinner would work. I could meet you in the lab, since I have keys anyways," he intoned, face unreadable.

"Cool, um, thanks. I'll see you next week then."

She turned to go, unsure of what else there was to say and not wanting to drag it out any further. He spoke up behind her.

"See you, El."

Something in her warmed back up, another iceberg breaking off of heart and splashing into the sea, undetectable by anyone who couldn't see it but shaking her entire being.

He still called her El.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

i fucking love lord of the rings like damn.

okay so this chapter didn't exactly end on a happy note, but sometimes that's how life is. el still needs to figure out what she wants and sometimes what you want and what you need aren't the same thing. mike is a saint... but he has his own flaws. perfection is overrated.

it's always dustin busting in and interrupting that damn kiss. every time.

my classes are only slightly terrible but i'm taking three psychology classes in a row and i'm very tired of freud and b.f. skinner and thinking about everything in my mind. i'm not even a psychology major what am i doing here.

anyways, wanted to say a quick thank you to everyone writing such sweet lil comments and wishing me well. i'll try and make you all proud. <3

let me know what you thought. i'll try and update again soon.

-g



## 5. I'm counting the steps to the door of your heart

### Notes for the Chapter:

back at it again at krispy kreme.

if you thought mike was a massive dork before...  
heh. i'm excited for you guys to read this chapter  
because it's really fucking cute.

sorry i haven't been responding to comments. i've  
only really had motivation to post lately, but i have  
these two psych classes that are stupidly complicated  
already. like it's been a week and a half, why do i  
have test on two chapters already. ugh.

however! i am reading each and every one of your  
comments and feeling all warm and fuzzy because of  
much you love my story. i hope i can make you all  
happy.

The week passed by slower than El wanted to admit. She was no longer in post-depressive episode mode so she could *feel* how slow it was. It didn't help that she didn't really know anyone in her classes so she had no distractions or companionship, staring at the clock between typing out notes or yawning through lectures.

Her sleep was fucked up too.

No matter how busy she was or how rigorous her schedule became, when she laid in bed at the end of day she found herself staring at the bottom of the bunkbed, listening to Max's wheezy breathing. He mind wanted to think about *him* but she refused, and the constant struggle of trying not to think made it impossible to sleep.

So she studied instead, sitting at her desk with her lamp on until she fell asleep, waking up at some odd of hour of the morning and crawling into bed to get a few more hours before classes. Her notes were blurred with wet lines from the amount of times she drooled on them, and one time a random girl in class pointed out that she had a

diagram of the kidney on her cheek, the pencil lead sticking to her face. It was getting embarrassing.

But more than anything she didn't want to talk about, didn't want to think about—

“Mike! Hey, come sit with us!” Max called across the cafeteria.

“Max,” El hissed, “don't you fucking dare.”

“What? You'll have to get over it eventually. You just fell asleep together... it's not that big of a deal. Isn't he tutoring you tonight anyways?”

She'd told Max most of the story—leaving out the almost kiss—but her friend hadn't been as sympathetic as she'd hoped.

“Yeah, but—”

He was towering over them and El stared down at her waffle, not knowing the first thing to say and not wanting to deal with it. Max smiled and patted the chair next to them.

“Sit with us, Mike! Don't be a loner,” she sang.

He looked uncomfortable but sat, knowing better than to argue with Max when she was in one of her friendly moods. It was breakfast so they all had eggs and waffles, but Mike couldn't help give El's a weird look.

“What's in it that's green?” he squinted.

“Spinach,” she cut it open so he could see, glad for the distraction from the awkward silence. “I mixed it in with the batter. There's bacon bits and onions in it too.”

“What did you put on top?”

“Um, that savory cream cheese? It's like vegetable flavored,” she shrugged.

He seemed astounded at yet another of her creations and Max rolled

her eyes.

“Sounds gross to me. Who wants a savory *waffle*?” she challenged.

“It sounds delicious,” he argued, eyes still fixed on the breakfast food as he grinned. “And it’s inventive. I’ll have to try it sometime... can I take a picture?”

“Um, sure,” El blinked.

His phone was out and he snapped the picture, and, despite everything that was telling her it was a bad idea, she stabbed a bite on her fork. And then she held it out to him.

“Did you... want to try it?”

He looked surprised but nodded gamely and opened his mouth. She realized he was expecting her to feed it to him and tried to hide her shaky hand, quickly shoving the fork into his mouth and nearly stabbing his tongue. He politely pretended like he didn’t notice and chewed the bite, looking thoughtful. After he swallowed he nodded.

“That’s fucking amazing. What if you put eggs on top too? Like scrambled or over easy?” he suggested.

“Oh... I didn’t think about that. I’m not a huge egg person...”

“What? Who doesn’t like eggs?” He looked down at his own yolk-covered plate, clearly offended. “They’re like the pinnacle of breakfast food. Superior to waffles even. Especially with syrup.”

“Careful, Mike,” Max warned. “She’ll fight you over waffles. She gave me a bloody lip one time.”

El looked outraged. “That was in middle school and it was an *accident*! I asked if you wanted any Eggos and you said no and then you just *took* mine! Of course I fought back.”

“But you didn’t have to bash me in the face with your elbow—”

“It. Was. An. Accident!”

They bickered for a moment and Mike looked between them, a slow grin spreading across his face as he came to a realization.

“So,” he interrupted and they looked at him. “You guys fought because she wouldn’t... *leggo your Eggos?*”

He was grinning broadly, looking very self-satisfied and they both groaned. Max grabbed a crumpled up napkin and threw it at his face. It bounced off his forehead but he didn’t stop laughing, putting his hands up in surrender.

“I take it back, you can’t sit with us anymore,” Max groaned.

El rolled her eyes, looking disgusted and shaking her head. “As if I’ve never heard *that* one before, you dork.”

Despite how uncomfortable she’d been at thought of dancing around not being his friend but still being friendly, everything felt okay again. He made it so easy and while she was grateful he wasn’t being a brat or an asshole about her rejecting him, she almost wished he would be. It would make it easier to keep from blushing when laughed at her, that telltale snort and wide grin lighting up her whole chest.

The clock struck eight fifteen and they quickly finished their breakfasts, scurrying to their next classes. Max gave El an “I told you so” look after he left but El refused to say anything. It would be too easy to be honest about how she was suddenly feeling.

Her Abnormal Psych class was the highlight of her day. The teacher was amazing, an actual psychologist who would bring up cases she’d seen or dealt with, making the disorders and symptoms they read about seem real. The notes were fill-in-the-blank, which helped keep note-taking stress to a minimum. She was learning so much about the disorders that others struggled with, as well as her own. It was nice to be able to give her demons a name.

It was nice to know she wasn’t the only one.

After that class she had a free period and then dinner. She usually ended up in the caf, but Max dragged her to Taco Bell since Dustin

was driving anyways. That was top of her list after she graduated and had money—a car. A way to escape, to drive away.

Max unwisely mentioned Mike and Dustin perked up as he ate his Crunchwrap Supreme, giving El a look.

“Oh, you guys are hanging out tonight?” he asked with obvious interest.

“No, he’s tutoring me. For A&P. We’re meeting at the lab,” El frowned.

“Alone, though?”

“Cut it out, Dustin. I’m not in the mood.”

“God, fine. If you’re so uninterested, how come you’re letting him tutor you?”

El sighed, resting her chin in her hands.

“Because before I... unfriended him, he promised to help me pass the class. I wouldn’t want to break his code of honor or whatever because I’m a bitch.”

“You’re not a bitch,” Dustin disagreed, “but I get it. He’s been like that since we were kids, with the promise thing. Always making sure to follow through. His dad let him down a lot, he always wanted a football playing jock for a son and Mike was never... well, you know him. Not exactly the athletic type. So his dad would always promise to come to the science fairs and decathlons and whatnot that we were a part of. But I never saw him there.”

El felt a bit of pity stab her heart. Her “father” never really followed through on his promises either, but Mike had turned it into something good instead of... letting it “damage” him. She felt a tinge of admiration and decided she wouldn’t make fun of his promises anymore. Maybe she could even... learn something from that.

“That’s so fucking sad,” Max blurted. “Like what a shitty dad.”

Dustin shrugged. “Ted was okay to us. He just always seemed a little

disappointed. One of those dad who kind of tries but is mostly clueless. It's not like he was... abusive or something. He still probably doesn't know."

"Having an absent father as an adolescent can affect a child in their later years," El recited.

They gave her a look, eyebrows raised in synch.

"Uh, my abnormal psych class, we were talking about childhood trauma and stuff. Just seemed relevant, sorry," she explained it away, still thinking about what she had said and puzzling.

If she and Mike had both had shitty dads—admittedly Papa had been worse than the absent Ted—how had they turned out so differently? Mike was warm and bright, like the sun silvering the underside of a cloud, almost too bright too look at. And somehow she'd ended up a gloomy storm.

*It's a chemical imbalance*, she reminded herself, trying to shake of the idea that somehow it was all her fault. *You can't change your depression.*

They headed back to campus after eating their fill and El realized that she was going to be late to meet Mike and nearly sprinted across campus after they got back. Her ankle-brushing skirt was hot pink today, and she wished she'd worn leggings instead as she tripped on it three times. She walked into the lab huffing and puffing, clutching her book to her chest and lugging her messenger bag, anxiety and guilt at her lateness making her heart rate skyrocket.

Or at least that's what she told herself.

He looked up as she walked in, from where he was sitting at one of the counters, his own textbooks scattered about in front of him. His dark hair was flopping into his eyes and he smiled brightly—that supernova smile that made her want smile back like a total doofus. She quickly looked away from his warm gaze, throwing her bag onto the counter a few seats down from him. Distance was good.

"Oh, hey, El," he greeted her casually, like he noticed she was

uncomfortable.

"Sorry I'm late," she panted, digging out her pencil bag and book, "Dustin and Max made me go to Taco Bell for dinner."

"*Again?* I'm surprised she lets him eat that badly. Aren't future PE teachers supposed to be like, healthy or something?"

"I've brought that up but she says exercising and healthy eating are two different things and she's not going to worry about it yet."

"I guess she *is* still a freshmen..." he ruminated and El immediately went on the defense, frowning.

"So am I. What's that got to do with it?"

"Oh, well like... you guys eat really badly. I did too. I gained like... twenty pounds freshman year," he explained. "It's a thing. The Freshmen Fifteen."

"You *did?*" She looked him up and down. "*Where?*"

He laughed then, and she had to bite her lip to keep from smiling at his silly chortle. Damn it, why did it have to be so great?

"Okay, that's fair. I get it, I'm like a beanpole. You could string a flag up on me and not even realize I was human. I was a great tree in my high school play," he grinned, sucking in his stomach to look even skinnier and she finally let herself giggle. "I'm that tall guy you always forget is around because you never look up. Sticks but no stones. Lanky McGee. Scrawny is my middle name."

He was starting to go into self-deprecating territory, the jabs turning from silly to serious, and she frowned a bit. Did he not know he was totally adorable in an awkward-lanky-cute kind of way? Skinny legs fit him, if he had short legs he would look weird. He looked fine. *Damn* fine.

*Snap out of it, Eleven*, she shook her head at herself and quickly poked his shoulder with a frown.

"You're not scrawny," she tried to argue.

He raised a brow. "Have you seen my chicken legs?"

"Well, no, but like... your shoulders." She put her hands on them and kind of tried to scrunch him together, hoping he would see that they were broad enough to balance him. "They're proportional to your height. You're kinda skinny but you're not... scrawny. You look fine."

She quickly snatched her hands back and shoved them in to her lap. So much for boundaries. He did that nice thing where he pretended not to notice that she was being totally awkward and nodded, pursing his lips to hide a smile.

"Um, well, thanks, El."

"Don't mention it." She felt her face flushing again, moving to open her book. "So anyways. Skeletons. Bones. I need to know them."

"Right!" He got up and she frowned as he walked backwards away from her, towards the corner of the room. "I need to introduce you to someone. My friend, you could say," he smiled conspicuously and then headed for the supply closet. "Hang on a second."

She frowned harder. He'd let someone else in here? A sort-of-friend? Was it... a girl? Was he hiding some girl in the closet? A sickening feeling twisted her stomach and she looked away from where he'd disappeared, not wanting to see whatever pretty girl he was going to come out with, giggling and holding hands. She didn't need to meet her.

Instead of voices there was a weird sound, like wheels on the floor and then clattering, like someone was rattling a rack of jewelry. Her curiosity got the best of her and she looked up. Her mouth dropped open at the ridiculous sight before her.

Mike was pushing a skeleton, which was on a handy rack with wheels, across the floor to where she was sitting. He stopped in front of her, standing hidden behind the bones so all she could see was skeleton. His fingers gripped the ulna and radius, thrusting the boney hand out towards in a familiar gesture.

"Hello there!" He made his voice croaky and dry, like an old man.



"I'm Bonejangles, your new best friend."

She couldn't move, frozen in shock as she stared at the neatly preserved skeleton that was in front of her, totally flabbergasted and unable to process a response. It was too ridiculous to comprehend. After a few more seconds of silence, Mike ducked around the skull, looking earnest and nodded his head towards the hand that was being offered to her.

"El," he whispered, "say hello to the skeleton man."

"Um," she snapped out of her staring and grabbed the phalanges tentatively. "Hello Mister... Bonejangles."

Just saying the name made her smile and she tried to keep a serious face, watching Mike as he used the skeleton to shake hands with her. His eyes were gleaming and he looked so cute she wanted to push Bonejangles out of the way and just stare at him instead. But then he opened his mouth, speaking for their rather dead new friend.

"What's your name, young lady?" That voice was back and she felt herself starting to smile at the ridiculousness. "My friend Mike, the smartest guy on the whole campus, told me you needed some help learning bones."

"Eleven, um—" She was trying not to laugh but the voice. "Mike is right. I need help."

"I'm so happy to meet you, Eleven, now should we start with—"

It was too much and she shook her head as the giggles bubbled up her throat, her hand pressing to her stomach.

"Oh my god, Mike. Stop! I can't!"

She couldn't hold it in, sitting back and laughing outright, rolling on her stool as he tried to make the skeleton scratch its crusty skull, like it was confused at what she found so funny.

"Aww, you don't like Bonejangles?" He was back using his regular voice. "Everyone like Bonejangles, I think it's the voice..."

“No!” she gasped as she wiped her eyes. “He’s fantastic but I’m not —” She had to stop and take another deep breath, “I’m not going to be able to remember anything if I’m *laughing* the whole time! I have to pay attention.”

He came out from behind Bonejangles, grinning broadly. Why did he have to be so damn funny? And not just regular funny, but like, *charming* funny. She tried to strengthen her resolve, swallowing the last of her laughter and straightening her shoulders determinedly.

“I *really* need to remember everything, specifically the skull bones,” she tried to be serious and he quirked an eyebrow at her tone.

Plucking the skull off the body, he held it up dramatically, staring into it’s gaping eyes as it stared back, suddenly solemn. He posed, all long limbs and angles, hand splayed into the air.

“Alas! Poor Yorick!” he quoted before settling down next to her and plunking the skull in front of her.

“I knew him, Horatio’,” she quoted back casually, picking it up, “‘a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy’.”

“You know Shakespeare?” he seemed surprised.

“Yeah. I grew up with a library full of classics. That’s why I read Lord of the Rings. Shakespeare was funny at least, compared to like, Wuthering Heights or something. The love story in Romeo and Juliet was garbage, but the trash talk between the Capulets and Montagues made it worth it. Reading was what I did the most.”

“I always thought that one was overrated. Like, yeah, okay, young love and romance and whatever but like... six people *died*,” he shook his head.

She snorted. “Hamlet was way better, the joyous festivity plays were always my favorite. Midsummer Night’s Dream, Much Ado About Nothing, Twelfth Night... totally stupid and romantic, but at least they were *fun*.”

She was still examining the skull, not seeing the side-eyed look he was giving her, biting his lip and trying to fight back a smile. With a

sigh she set it down, already starting to feel a bit overwhelmed.

“Okay, now’s the part where you help me and teach your secret tricks to remembering which is occipital and what all the bumps are,” she prompted.

“Right. Okay so—”

The next two hours blurred by as he repeated the different names and labels over and over, occasionally pulling Bonejangles closer to show her something and then making little sticky notes that she attached to each part. He made it easy, never being condescending—even when she asked painfully stupid questions—and encouraging her with one of his warm smiles.

He did try to be respectful regarding their conversation, keeping his distance and only moving in close when she pointed something out. It was like he was trying really hard to not be too friendly, but was still his usual, dorky self. It was so damn *nice* and she started to feel something in her break a bit. More ice melting, with each bad joke and encouraging smile and careful explanation.

He was just so *good*. It made her feel weird but good. Good weird? Was that even a thing?

When the time was up, the sun had already set and the cold January wind was blustering across the flat campus, the buildings make tunnels of icy blasting air. She’d brought her parka and worn her Ugg boots, knowing it was fucking freezing outside. Sure, they were ugly, but they did a damn good job of keeping her ankles and torso warm. Comfort was so much better than fashion. She finished packing her bag and they walked to front doors of the science building, both hesitant to leave the warmth.

Mike frowned as he looked across the dark campus, riddled with shadows.

“Hey, um, is it cool if I walk you to your dorm?” He seemed antsy.

“Mike... that’s kind of... *friendly*,” she smirked to soften her words, not wanting to be harsh but also not wanting to go back on what

she'd said before. "Walking girls to their dorms is like the equivalent of second base around here."

"No, I'm not—" He blushed, shaking his head. "It's just... it's dark and like... creepy out there. It's the decent human thing to do. I'd feel bad letting any girl walk across campus alone this late. Second base isn't, um, required."

She narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously, but then glanced out the doors again. It *was* awfully dark, and the science building was a good half a mile from her dorm. Normally she had Max, and the two of them together were pretty intimidating, but by herself?

She bit her lip and nodded. "Okay, that's fair. I'll let you walk me to my dorm. Since it's the decent human being thing to do."

They headed out of the building and walked in silence, the only sound the howl of the wind that blistered across the plains, shriveling everything in its wake. Winter was her least favorite season. The way it chilled her to the bone, the days of dreary, gray clouds and pale snow, all traces of green and color and warmth stolen away. Spring was her favorite, still cool but full of the awakening of the earth. Tiny purple hyacinths and green buds. Even now her soul yearned for it, to take away the monochromatic purgatory she was frozen into, the cold earth freezing her in place.

She *hated* winter.

But she dealt with it the same she always had, trying to keep from letting it affect her. The cold whistled through the campus again and she braced herself to be hit by the gust that never came. It took her a second but she realized he was walking on her right side, staggering a bit as he buffered the wind, so it wouldn't blow her over.

It was so considerate she almost stopped walking, taken by surprise. Instead she stumbled and then caught herself, shaking her head.

"You can't make this easy, can you?" she muttered to herself, annoyed at his nice habits.

"What was that?" He turned to her, chin tucked into his scarf, hands

in his pockets.

"Oh, nothing," she quickly bluffed, "just talking to myself."

"Gotcha. I do that all the time."

They had finally reached the steps of her dorm and she paused, unsure if she should say something or not. He looked equally unsure, like he *wanted* to say something, but didn't think he should and she finally let out a sigh. Each step had beaten her down, the resolve she'd so carefully tried to build dissolving with every breath and heartbeat. It wasn't fair. Any of it. But especially what she had refused him.

"Okay, fine," she exhaled. "I take it back."

He blinked, completely confused.

"What?"

El winced, hoping she wouldn't regret it but nodding agreeably. "We can be friends, Mike. If it's like it was today. I feel like... it's weirder trying not to be friends when it's easy to be around you and talk to you and I don't know—"

"Really?" he interrupted, standing up to his full height, eyes suddenly shining. "You're serious?"

"Yes. I'm for real. But we can't—I mean, *I* can't hang out with you alone unless we're studying or something, okay? It's just hard to—I mean—" She sighed heavily, at a loss for words to describe exactly how he made her feel. "Look, you're awfully charming, Mike Wheeler," she sighed dramatically. "So don't make me regret it. We're *friends*, okay?"

"Does that mean we can talk about Lord of the Rings again? Friends can lend each other books, right? And movies? Maybe even comics?" He was almost bouncing up and down and she tried to hold back a grin as he babbled excitedly. "I have the Hobbit and the Sil—"

"Yes." She cut him off with a smirk. "I will accept your friendship in book form."

He looked like a puppy she'd just decided to adopt, and the smile that threatened to tell him exactly what he meant to her tried to light up her face. If there was anything in the world that couldn't happen, it was that. He couldn't know just how much he affected her. How much he made her chest glow, how warm she suddenly felt inside as he smiled down at her.

He *definitely* couldn't know. But he could be her friend.

With a forced shrug—to keep from stepping closer and doing something stupid like *hugging* him—she tried to be casual. He seemed to catch the vibe and tried to calm himself, his own feet wavering, like they wanted to move closer too. Instead he nodded. “Um, well, cool. I'll grab that for next week if I don't see you before then. Maybe at the caf, with those awesome waffles you make?”

“Sounds good,” she allowed herself a less geeky smile, deciding that was totally appropriate. Her hand brushed his arm as she stepped back towards the steps to her dorm putting space between them though all she wanted to do was move closer. “Night, Mike.”

With little ceremony she turned around and started to walk up the stairs, letting the full-power, megawatt smile take over as she walked away. Where she knew he wouldn't see it, so it wouldn't matter.

She heard him call after, a reply to her short farewell.

“Night, El.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

if anyone was wondering, yes, bonejangles is direct reference to the character in corpse bride. i couldn't resist and also like how great of a name is that??

good news: i finished figuring out the rest of the plot and i officially have an outline. i haven't actually added anything to this story in about a week because i was stuck but last night i gOT IT AND EVERYONE IS GOING TO SUFFER AND IT'LL BE GREAT. that's vague haha but you'll have to trust me.

next chapter is cute too. there's a sleepover, but that's all i can. i'll try and update within the next two days, for all of you who can't wait. ;)

love you all dearly

-g

## 6. Maybe we could be the start of something

### Notes for the Chapter:

surprise!

i'm so motivated to work on this fic and get caught up writing it that i decided to post another chapter today. because i'm nice sometimes. and also idk i'm so excited for you all to read this story i want to get it out as soon as possible.

but i'm going to try and pace myself after this so don't expect this all time i'm gonna get so busy soon help i hate college.

TRIGGER WARNING:  
mentions of suicide and self-harm.

there's a lot of dialogue in this chapter. like a lot. but it's about time they started to get to know each other a little better, right?

El was grateful for the tutoring sessions as the next few weeks went by and the tests and quizzes slowly got harder. It was so nice to have the person who assisted the teacher—who knew the material *exactly*—helping her study. She was pretty sure she'd never been taught more efficiently in her entire life.

It didn't hurt that her tutor was stupidly attractive and always made her laugh with his terrible Gollum impression when she started to get stressed out. It didn't hurt at all.

She wouldn't admit they were her favorite part of the week, but Max was starting to notice how she perked up on Fridays. How she wore her favorite sweaters and showered more often. How she was trying to take care of herself more than she had in months.

Her roommate wisely said nothing. For once.

The biggest reason she was grateful for the tutoring was because the



class was going to dissect an entire cat in March and were currently learning the anatomy of that *and* the human body. She'd dissected several things in her life, mostly insects and frogs, but something about the cat was unnerving her. She liked cats.

"It's not too bad, just don't give it a face or anything. And pray you don't get one that was pregnant. I heard a few years ago someone opened their cat and there were a bunch of kittens inside," Mike advised her and she blanched.

"*Kittens?* Like *dead* ones?" she gaped.

"Yeah... it was pretty sad, but the mom died before they had a chance so..." He shrugged, grimacing. "It's shitty but it happens. Don't think about it, okay?"

"I'm going to be the girl that cries over a dead cat, oh my god," she'd fretted.

He'd calmed her down and then walked her back to her dorm as usual. They never actually met anybody on the walk back, but he insisted it was safer for her not to be alone and it was one of those things she decided not to challenge. And it meant she got to hang around him for an extra twelve minutes and chat about the sins of Boromir or Shakespearean insults. Sometimes he would show her the new issue of X-Men he'd ordered and had even started convincing her to give Star Wars a try—something not even Dustin had been able to do.

It was just another nice thing she got to look forward to, even though it was still super cold. That wasn't so great.

"I'll like it better when it's warmer," she puffed, her breath visible in the air. "February always lasts forever. Are you going to walk with me when it's still light out?"

"I'm going to walk you back until the end of the year. I don't trust the neighborhood on this side of campus, it's too sketchy."

"Oh, is that a promise?"

It wasn't a dig. She was curious.

"Yeah, I guess so," he agreed amicably. "It makes me feel better, so it's more of a promise to myself than you."

"Fair enough."

They parted ways with their usual casual smiles and El headed into the building. She paused at the doors, like she always did, and watched him turn, rubbing his cold hands together before striding to his own dorm that was another half mile north. His tall figure disappeared down the sidewalk and she sighed, quickly scurrying to the elevator.

When she got up to her floor, she frowned as she approached her room. There was a duffle bag—*her* duffle bag—hanging from the handle along with an entire piece of notebook paper containing a note. Grabbing both, she glanced at the door and then tried the handle, realizing it was locked, which was definitely odd since she knew Max was in there. With a sigh she read the scribbles on the paper.

*Ellie,*

*Please don't hate me but it's Valentine's Day and I'm officially exiling you from our room for the night. I put your toothbrush and clothes in your bag. Dustin says you can take his bed tonight so you're not homeless or anything. He washed his sheets yesterday just for you. No taco smell! The key is in the pocket of your bag.*

*I love you, I swear.*

*Max*

El let out a frustrated growl. Part of her wanted to unlock the door and bust in so she could bitch out her roommate, but the bigger part of her knew better, not wanting to know what was happening on the other side. The last thing she wanted to do was sleep in Dustin's room, but the fact that he'd washed his bedding just for her made her slightly less mad. Apparently they'd been planning this behind her back. Rude.

She didn't have any choice but to do as the note said so with another

angry sigh she grabbed her stuff and turned around to head back out into the cold night. The dorm where Dustin lived was fairly close and she got there pretty fast, sighing again and then knocking on the door. She'd been trying to ignore the fact that was that Dustin had a roommate. A tall, dorky, irresistible roommate she was trying *not* to spend time alone with. And now she was about to spend an entire night in the same room as him.

*Don't do anything stupid*, she told herself.

Mike answered after a few moments, looking surprised to see her.

"Oh, um, hey, El." His eyes drifted behind her for a moment like he was expecting to see Max or Dustin or anyone. But nope. She was totally alone.

"Your roommate is currently desecrating my room with my best friend and they evicted me so I'm supposed to stay here tonight," she huffed. "It was cruel and rude and I'm kind of grumpy so that's the only warning you get since you'll be stuck with me all night."

"Oh... is that why Dustin actually washed his sheets? I thought that was kind of odd..." he scooted to the side and let her in, face caught somewhere between uncertain and pleased. "Well, um, welcome back. Feel free to use all the facilities you already know are there since all the dorms here are carbon copies of each other."

"Thanks," she snorted, then looked up at the bed she'd been gifted for the night. "I'm not a fan of top bunk though," she sighed, "I'm always afraid I'll roll off in the middle of night... I'm kind of... restless."

"Did you want bottom bunk? I could sleep up top tonight," Mike offered.

She rolled her eyes at his niceness. "I'm not going to kick you out of your bed Mike."

"But it's just one—"

"You'll hit your head on the ceiling, remember? I'll be fine. It's just one night," she repeated, shooting him a reassuring smile before tossing her things onto Dustin's desk chair.

She dug around her bag for pajamas and then frowned at what she pulled. Max had packed her pajama shorts instead of pants and tank top. The only time she wore anything that showed her arms and legs was when she slept, since Max had already seen the scars. But now she wasn't with Max and it was a *problem*. He'd already seen the ones on her arms and they were shitty but they weren't the worst. He didn't need to see the worst.

"Shit," she mumbled to herself. "Fuck."

Of course she'd worn a skirt again that day instead of leggings, and she couldn't sleep in that. It was the shorts or nothing and she frowned, going over to the sink in the room to brush her teeth while she tried to think of something. Mike noticed of course, throwing her a worried look.

"Is something wrong?"

She spat, rinsing her mouth before turning around to talk to him. Her voice died as she faced him and realized he'd taken off his shirt, wearing just a pair of Star Wars pajama pants, his expression troubled. She'd been right, he did have broad shoulders, his skin smooth and pale across his chest. His shoulders were speckled with the same freckles on his face, and she swallowed and quickly looked away, hoping he hadn't noticed her staring.

*Fuck he's hot. Fuck shit fuck.*

"Um, I just..." She tried to find words that weren't profane, sighing and admitting her problem. "Max packed me the wrong pajamas. I don't really want to wear them."

"Did you want to borrow a pair? I have some Superman ones..." He moved toward his closet but she shook her head. He was a giant, they would go up to her chest.

"They'd probably be too big," she waved off the thought. "It's fine. I'll figure something out."

"What's wrong with the ones she packed? Too small or something?"

He was getting his own toothbrush, doing the similar nightly routine

as she had but talking all the while.

“No, they're not too small, but they're shorts and—” she cut herself off, realizing she didn't want to tell him why. He didn't need to know.

“Too cold? The AC does get a little chilly. I have an extra blanket if you want.”

“No...”

“Oh, are you afraid they're not appropriate or something?” He covered his eyes. “I won't look, I swear.”

She snorted but shook her head. “No. My butt is fully covered, no worries.”

He set his toothbrush down and mumbled something she didn't hear, quickly turning to look at her, eyebrow quirked, clearly curious.

“Okay... do I need to keep guessing or will you just tell me? I mean... I guess I don't have to know but if we're going to be roommates for the night...” He shrugged. “I mean maybe I can help you figure out a solution at last. I'm good at that.”

“It's...” she bit her lip, still hesitant.

He's already seen the ones on her wrists, but her legs were honestly worse. They crisscrossed and overlapped, thick and hideous, the white scar tissue like worms that covered her body. She hated looking at them and she didn't want him to see them either. But he said he'd close his eyes so...

“I have scars,” she admitted. “Bad ones and... I don't like people seeing them. Max is the only one who—” Another sigh. “I just don't want you to see them.”

“Scars?” He seemed puzzled for a second but then it dawned on him. “Oh, like the ones...” He brushed his wrists and she nodded, biting her lip.

“Um, yeah. But worse. It's gross and—”

"I mean, I won't judge you. I promise," he said quietly. "But if you don't want me to see, I could close my eyes until you're in bed, would that work?"

She breathed a sigh of relief. Of course he would understand. He was kind and understanding and would probably sleep outside on the floor if she asked. Not that she wanted him to. She definitely wanted him to stay here.

"Yeah, that would be great. Thanks, Mike."

She quickly changed while he turned the opposite way and then climbed up the ladder and tucked herself into Dustin's bed. It was cozy enough and she decided she could sleep even though it wasn't *her* bed. It was the weekend anyways, and she supposed it was lucky that Valentine's Day had fallen on a Friday and not in the middle of the week. Otherwise Max and Dustin would both be dead.

"I'm okay now, you can turn around," she told him softly.

He did, turning off the overhead light and then crawling into his own bed beneath her, reaching up to turn off his reading light too. She lay in the darkness, staring up at the ceiling, just thinking about the day and how it had led to this. Despite her strong dislike for being broken from her routine, somehow, this wasn't so bad.

"Did you know it was Valentine's Day?"

Mike's question startled her a bit, his voice weirdly disconnected in the dark.

"No," she answered honestly. "I knew it was February but... it's not a holiday I've ever really celebrated. I guess I wasn't paying attention."

"Really?" He sounded surprised. "No high school boyfriend? No freshmen fling?"

"I wasn't allowed to date back then and this campus is infested with greasy fuckboys. So... no. No boyfriends ever." She heard a sharp intake below her and blinked, wondering if she was hearing things. "Max *always* has a boyfriend this time of year, even if she only dates him for a month. I didn't really have anyone else to hang out with

back in high school so I just spent the day alone doing normal things. It's not like... a big deal."

"Wow. That's kind of sad," he teased.

"Oh, shut up," she huffed. "What about you? I'm sure the girls were all over you in high school. Tall guys are always popular."

"Not even close. I dated someone for like a month but it wasn't really anything serious, I think she just wanted a boyfriend and I was too awkward to say no. She dumped me and it was kind of a relief. Haven't really found anyone I liked enough to want date."

*Other than you.*

He didn't need to say the words that hung heavy in the air around them. The attraction between the two was undeniable, but she knew better than to act on it. It was a bad idea. She couldn't commit and it would complicate her already complicated life. And if Papa found out... That was something she didn't even *want* to think about.

Some part of her was amazed at how patient Mike was with her, even when she kept shutting the door in his face. Slamming it, really. But he just accepted her decisions and kept moving forward as though rejection didn't hurt. She remembered what Dustin had said, about Mike's dad never truly accepting his son as the geeky nerd he truly was. Was that why Mike was so quit to accept everything about her?

"Sorry," she blurted.

"For what?"

"That I'm not—Well, um, that I won't date you?" Her entire body was suddenly burning with embarrassment and she covered her face with her hands to muffle the scream that wanted to explode out of her.

*Why would you say something so awkward?!*

Mike didn't seem to even flinch.

"It's okay, El," his tone was painfully understanding. "You know what you want to do and what you need to get there and I'm not part of

that. I can respect that. Like I said, I like you as a person and a friend... without conditions. It doesn't have to be romantic."

"Ugh, romance." She tried to change the subject, not wanting to talk about just how much she was rejecting him. "All flowers and chocolates and mushy-gushy eeaauugh," she grimaced, sticking out her tongue. "Stupid."

"You don't like flowers and chocolates?"

"I mean... chocolate is *okay*. But flowers... you just watch them die. I'd rather have something practical, I guess."

"So you're not a flower person?" he asked.

"No, I mean, gardening is different, when the flowers are alive and there's green everywhere and it smells so good you could just cry..." A breath left her as she thought about the garden back at the estate. They'd had lilac bushes and roses that were carefully kept by their gardener. In the summer she'd leave her doors to her balcony open and let the delicious fragrance blow into her room as she slept. One of the few things she'd love about that place. The flowers. The library. Something caught in her throat and she tried to cough. "Um, yeah. Flowers are fine. Just not the cut ones that die."

"Duly noted."

"What about you?" she coughed again, trying focus on something else.

"Oh, I like those bouquets made out of candy bars if that's what you're asking. Or like... comics are always good."

"I should have know you'd like comics. Nerd."

"Hey, now!"

They spent the next hour just talking and laughing. She told him how spring was her favorite season, when everything came back to life, how her favorite color was pink and she liked birds and bats and butterflies and animals that could fly through the sky. He told her about his hometown, growing up with his three best friends and



being the awkward nerds, how his favorite color was blue—any shade—and that he was a sucker for mint chip ice cream.

The atmosphere in the cozy dorm room was softer, more relaxed than their tutoring sessions, and El felt another piece of ice melt a bit as he told her about a time he'd climbed up a tree and got stuck and his dad had to get out a ladder to get him down. He was afraid of heights, ironically enough.

Everything was so calm that she was surprised by the abruptness of his next question.

“So... why do you cover your scars?” He inhaled sharply, like he'd just realized what he'd asked her. “Sorry, um, you don't have to answer that. I'm just curious.”

She immediately tensed—any mention of her scars warranted a hostile response—but then she exhaled, remembering it was *Mike*, and Mike wasn't trying to be nosey or rude. It was a fair question after all, since he had actually seen the ones on her wrists and arms, but it was one of the very few things she wasn't bluntly honest about. It's not like it made her feel bad—just weird. How do you talk about the scars that prove how much you hate yourself without sounding pitiful? It just was what it was now. They weren't going away anytime soon.

She bit her lip, suddenly *wanting* to talk to him, to give him something in return for being so understanding. Some bit of herself, something almost nobody knew. He, out of any one in the entire world, deserved to know the truth.

“I just think they're gross,” she said quietly. “Especially the ones on my legs. They look... nasty and unnatural, like my body is some kind of horror movie. I—I don't know...”

“Oh.” It was clear he didn't know how to reply.

She appreciated that he didn't try to convince her that she was beautiful inside instead of outside or some other bullshit she'd been told by therapists and doctors. Nobody knew how she felt about her scars... except maybe Max, but not even her best friend truly

understood. They weren't something she was suddenly just going to accept because someone told her she should. They weren't something she was sure she could ever accept.

They were ugly and they reminded her every day of how weak she'd been. Of how weak she still was.

The words slipped out. "Did you already figure out how I got them?"

It was a challenge. To see if he would say it or if he would try to dance around it like most people did. She heard him gulp, but he answered, voice curious.

"Well... I assume it was self-harm?"

"Sort of. The ones on my legs and stomach were self-harm. The ones on my wrists are—" She bit her lip but continued on. They were past the point of no return now and she laid out her secrets in front of him, wondering why but feeling like he needed to know. Like he deserved to know before he got too close and realized just how fucked up she was. She would tell him. She wouldn't let it be a surprise.

"Those are from when I tried to kill myself four years ago."

It was dead quiet and she flinched, gasping, immediately regretting her words, feeling like she was dumping on him. He hadn't asked for this, but she was pushing it on him anyways. It had been a stupid idea. She had wanted to share with him, but this was too much, too intimate, too—

"I'm sorry, El." His voice was sympathetic but not full of the stinging pity that was usually thrown her way by the bucketful, as if she didn't know she was pitiful stupid. But Mike didn't sound condescending. He just sounded... sincere. "I'm glad that it didn't... work."

"Me too." She found herself relaxing again at his tone, letting the story slowly flow out. "You can thank Max for that, actually. Without her it might have. She found me."

"Found you?"

"Yeah." Another deep breath. Another truth. "I tried to bleed out in the tub but she broke the door down when I wouldn't answer and then called an ambulance. Put pressure on me until they got there and then she didn't leave the hospital for like two days. I made her go home and shower when I finally woke up but she didn't leave me the entire time. She saved my life... she still does sometimes."

There were several reasons she was so devoted to her best friends, but that was one of the biggest ones. She could still remember blinking up through the hazy red water as a hand gripped her shoulder, pulling her from the hazy darkness she'd been sinking into. Seeing the terror on her friend's face as she was pulled out, the sting of the towels on her open wrists, Max's crying and pleading as she had slowly slipped back into the darkness. Waking up in the hospital with a warm lump curled up on the bed like a ginger cat, her best friend looking like a worried mess, hair greasy and eyes red and swollen.

El's heart swelled as she thought about her friend and the unconditional love she'd given her through the years. She would never deserve Max, but she tried. Max made her want to try.

"Wow. You guys really are best friends," Mike breathed.

It was more than that and she tried to explain why. It wasn't just El being dependent... Max needed her too.

"Her home life was kind of shitty. Her stepbrother was really... violent? Out of control. And her parents were always fighting with each other and him. She kind of moved in with me, since my... dad was never really home anyways and the housekeepers didn't snitch. She took care of me and I was her home."

"I kind of get that," Mike agreed. "Will's dad is... he was terrible. Sometimes when we were little I would let him sleepover. After his mom kicked his dad out it got better. I'm glad you had each other."

"She's my sister now," she told him honestly. "I—I love her, um, and that's not—I mean, I'm not good at that. But I do. She deserves that and more."

"That's good, El," he replied softly.

It was quiet again—but not awkwardly so, more like they had just run out of things to say. She rolled on her side, toward the empty space that filled the room, tucking herself further under the covers. She was starting to feel the tiredness from the day and the sudden bout of emotions, yawning and sliding her feet under the covers, just enjoying how *cozy* and safe she felt. She didn't know it was possible to feel so safe when not in her own bed. She sighed, stretching a hand out towards the darkness and letting it dangle over the side.

"I've never really told anyone that, you know," she pointed out quietly. "Not anyone who wasn't a therapist or something. So you're allowed to feel a little special."

"Oh... wow. Thanks, El. I won't tell anyone—" He started but she cut him off.

"I know you won't. You're like, weirdly easy to trust, I dunno," she sighed. "Probably since I trust you with my grades all the time."

There was a breath, like there was something he wanted to ask, but he stayed silent and she blinked awake enough to sit up on her elbow. She talked into the empty space, knowing what was on his mind. It was so rare for her to talk about it, and she tried to swallow the part that wanted to tell him *everything*, instead clearing her throat.

"You can ask, if you want."

She didn't want to dump on him again, but if he wanted to know something specific... she would tell him anything then. Even the things she hadn't really told herself.

"Are you sure?" he asked, sounding cautious.

"I won't—it doesn't like, trigger me to talk about it. I'm past that now. You can ask."

"Okay then..." he swallowed. "Why did you try to kill yourself?"

She paused. It was a complicated question but not really. Why she'd

done it in the moment? Easy. But the psychology and pain behind it? Harder to explain.

"Do you want the easy answer or the complicated one?"

"Whichever makes more sense to you," he replied.

So the story spilled out. Papa and his plans for her future, the intense pressure and constant barrage of lessons and expectations and tutors. The ballet recital, the disappointment, the pain of being told she wasn't good enough. The darkness that surrounded her and swallowed her whole until she felt like it was the only thing that was real.

"After I turned sixteen—it was like I lived in this black hole. I was kind of emo back then, honestly. Like emo kids on MySpace? I totally had the look, all black everything and long hair with bangs over my eyes. Stayed in my room, put collages of black roses and skulls all over everything, black nail polish, black eyeliner that was too thick. I owned every My Chemical Romance album—" Mike let out a snort of laughter and she tried to hide her own smile, scowling instead. "—which is still a good band by the way. Leave them alone." She still had those CDs. "But I was... I couldn't see beyond myself and what I was feeling and every day was a struggle. I didn't know how to cope with what was happening to me. I didn't know I could feel different. I was just... sad."

"Depression," he stated solemnly.

"Yup. I didn't know it had an exact name until later, I mean, everyone is depressed when they're sixteen, but it's not always depression. School usually messes everyone up but the funny thing was, I still had good grades in mostly everything. I did all my homework while I was alone or with Max... that wasn't really a problem." She paused, staring up at the ceiling in the dark. "The only class I sucked at was PE."

"Oh, man, do I feel that," he chuckled. "You might not believe it, but I don't do very well with sports. Or any sort of physical activity involving balls."

The room was dead silent as he realized what he'd just said and El could almost hear him trying to think of a way to backtrack, a disbelieving giggle leaving her lips before she could help it.

"No! That's not what I meant! I love balls! I mean—fuck, I mean not like *that*, I'm—" His spluttering and struggling and it made El laugh even harder as he fumbled for words. "I mean like football or basketball or soccer, okay?! Balls hit me in the face it's a curse—But not like, *balls*, okay I'm—fuck I'm so fucking sorry you have to deal with me right now," he groaned, his voice muffled by his hands she knew were covering his face in embarrassment.

She chortled again, not wanting to let him get away that easily. "So no physical activity involving balls, huh? What a disappointment."

"Huh?" Confused shuffling from below. "Wait, are you—"

"Don't worry, Mike, I got it. You're not a fan of balls. I won't judge just because I don't mind them." Her tone was more flirty than she meant it to be and she felt her own face getting warm. "You know what I mean, right?"

He sounded choked, "Yeah."

"Cool," she smiled, liking that he wasn't afraid to laugh despite the serious topic they'd been discussing. Remembering the story she was telling, she let herself calm and then continued. "But um, yeah, I wasn't huge on changing in front of people when my legs looked like chopped liver and I was afraid the teacher would notice or something. I skipped it almost every week. I couldn't make myself go—I was too scared. I mean, I'm not big on running or sports either—" She allowed herself to smirk, tone knowing, "but... I just hated a lot of things and ended focusing on that class. And I missed too many days."

"So you failed it?" he guessed.

"Yup. It was the first F I'd ever got in my entire life. Papa lost his shit." She took in a heavy breath. "And everything just kind of spiraled from there. I didn't have ballet to use as an outlet and I was just so hard to move... I felt like a burden to Max and a failure for

Papa and they were the only two people I really cared about. I thought I was done, that I couldn't be anything but a failure even when I tried. So I told Max not to come over that night and filled the tub and—" It was still hard to say so she didn't. "But she's too smart, she knew better than to believe me. And like, she was my only friend so it's not like I could actually have been busy with someone else. Papa wasn't there either. She knew."

El took a deep breath, feeling somehow relieved to have let it all out. It had been so long since she'd talked about it and usually it was with a therapist or counselor she'd never really trusted. But she trusted Mike. If anything proved that, it was this night.

She heard the rustling of sheets, like he was moving around below her in his bed.

"So..." He dragged the word, like he was still worried he would ask too much, "um, it was your dad's—sorry, your not-dad's pressure to be perfect?"

"And the depression. I have general anxiety and depression. So add that to a crippling inferiority complex and the fear of failure and yeah, that's somewhere in there. And, I mean, being a teenager didn't help. That time just kind of... sucks."

"High school sucks," he agreed.

"Life kind of just... sucks."

They both laughed—though Mike seemed a bit uneasy—and then it was quiet again. It was getting harder and harder for her to keep the warm fuzzy feeling from filling her up. Talking to him was so easy, even this stuff, the stuff that normally tripped people up. Part of her felt relieved. Being honest and open was so... cleansing. She didn't want to stop, she wanted to tell him everything but...

Exhaustion was creeping in and she yawned, letting out a telling squeak at the end.

"You tired?" he guessed.

"Yah," she yawned again.

“Me too, we should probably call it a night. But, um, thanks for, um, letting me ask my dumb questions.”

“They weren’t dumb,” she protested. “Sometimes I forget it’s good for me to talk about it. So thanks for listening I guess.”

There was a breath. “I’ll listen any time you need me to, El.”

He was doing that nice, understanding thing again and she felt herself get annoyed almost automatically. But she quickly swallowed it down instead of lashing out this time, knowing it wouldn’t be fair. He’d just taken in a lot, he was allowed to be sweet this time.

It wasn’t his fault he was the nicest person she’d ever met and that he was genuinely interested in her. She tried to remember not to take out her frustrations on him, sighing heavily, annoyed with herself for being so defensive. It wasn’t a good habit.

Instead she let the warmth creep back in, the one that filled the air around her and emanated from where he was below her. She smiled, knowing he couldn’t see it in the dark, and snuggled into her pillow, feeling suddenly, stupidly happy.

“Thanks, Mike.”

&&&

There was something touching El’s shoulder, something gently prodding her and she huffed, rolling over and trying to snuggle down further into the comforter. She was so *comfy* and cozy and it was Saturday anyways—

“El?”

Max’s voice was lower than usual. And she didn’t call her Ellie today. Odd.

“Hey, we’re going to miss breakfast if you don’t get up.”

She groaned again but sighed and rolled over, sticking her feet over the edge of the bed and hopping out, knowing she would be more upset if she missed breakfast. If she got up now it wouldn’t be so bad.



*Time to get up, feet on the floor, walk to the sink and wash your face...*

“Woah, El, wait—”

She opened her eyes just in time to realize she was on a top bunk and definitely not in her room. But her legs were already over and she was leaning and—

She fell, arms outstretched, a shriek ripping from her throat as she plummeted toward Mike, who was directly below her, eyes equally large.

He stuck his arms out to catch her, but wasn't braced for her weight and his legs crumpled as she fell onto him. They hit the ground with matching “oof!”s, Mike landing right on his back and taking the brunt of it, the air leaving his lungs as El came down on top of him, her elbows crashing against the hard, rug-covered linoleum. Mike gasped for air and El winced as she grabbed her elbow, pain shooting up her arms and legs, blinding her for a moment..

It faded enough after a few breaths and she realized what she'd done, how stupid and half-asleep she'd been.

“I'm sorry!” she exclaimed, looking down at him.

He caught his breath just in time for them to *both* realize she was on *top* of him, straddling him actually, her body pressed against his. Heat flashed up to her cheeks and traveled down as her heart sped up at their closeness, at the feel of him against every inch of her. It felt good... really good, so good that for a moment she considered staying there. Forever.

But then reality crashed in and she turned bright red and rolled off of him, landing on her butt a few inches away and then scooting back, eyes apologetic and embarrassed.

“That was—I'm so fucking sorry. I thought I was in my room and—”

“Good thing I make a great pillow,” he rasped, sitting up and coughing, wincing but not looking too upset with her. “I wish I could say that was the first time I've been someone else's soft landing...”

“It wasn’t?” Somehow she wasn’t surprised.

“My little sister jumped down the stairs one time when I was fourteen and knocked me onto the concrete basement floor,” he tilted his chin up, showing a white, puckered scar. “I landed on my front and split my chin open. It was gnarly.”

The mention of *his* scar reminded her of her own. Which were now stretched out in front of her as she sat on the floor, legs splayed in front of her, pajama shorts ridden up to wedgie territory from her rather frantic scooting. His eyes went down to where she was looking automatically and she saw them widen and—

Her heart went cold as they fill with *pity*. She fucking *hated* pity.

“*Don’t*—” she started to say but he immediately slapped his hands over his eyes, so hard she felt herself wince in pain.

“Fuck, I’m sorry, you didn’t want me to see,” he sounded guilty and she calmed, feeling kind of bad for getting so upset again. “I won’t look until you change, sorry.”

*He’s already seen them*, she sighed. *I guess there’s nothing to hide now.*

And part of her wanted to know if he could deal with it. He’d taken all of it so easily, her story of a sadness so consuming it almost had cost her her life. He’d accepted all of it... but could he accept seeing it, letting it become real?

She cleared her throat, “It’s... fine. You already saw them anyways.”

“No, really, I can—”

“Just fucking look, Mike. I don’t even care,” she snapped. “I wouldn’t lie if I wasn’t okay with it. Just look at them.”

He slowly uncovered his eyes, but didn’t look down, meeting her gaze instead.

“Are you sure?” He was tentative.

She deflated completely. “Yeah, I told you. I trust you.”

So he looked, but this time without pity, tracing the lines of scar tissue that overlapped and spread across her pale thighs like cobwebs, whispers of her painful past. Some of them were lumps, cords of white that looked more like worms than flesh, overtaking her thighs, down the backs of her calves and around her ankles. They were unmistakable and she had to take a few deep breaths before she let herself look at his face.

He seemed pensive, brown tense, but the pity from early was gone. Now there was just the struggle to believe, to acknowledge that the sad story she'd told him was real.

It wasn't a big deal in some ways, but it was something she hadn't been able to accept about herself yet. The mind stuff, the actual depression and emotions... those were part of her. But these marks, these physical reminders of what she'd done... they were harder to accept. It was hard to accept what she'd done to herself, even though she hadn't done it in years.

He seemed to have the same thought in his mind. "Do you still...?"

His question surprised her for a second but she shook her head firmly.

"No, not anymore. I haven't in..." She had to take a moment and think about it. "Two and a half years? I stopped after the—" *The attempt*. "—after I tried, um, it didn't help and..." She bit her lip, feeling a surge of emotion. "It scared Max. A lot. I didn't want her to have to be afraid of losing me again, because after that I realized I had things I wanted to live for. I wanted to live because she needed me to. And back then, that was enough."

His eyes warmed and he nodded.

"Um, I know it's not really my place to say anything but..." He exhaled, letting a sincerity that she'd rarely seen fill his eyes. "I'm really proud of you, El." He smiled that crooked smile that warmed her entire body. "I'm glad you're so strong. I don't know if I could have made it through something like that. In fact... I don't think I could have. You're really amazing."

His words were so genuine she felt something inside of her shiver happily. She'd made someone proud, which was admittedly rare. And she'd done it just by... choosing to live. She bit her lip and looked down, not wanting him to know how much he was affecting her right then. Because it was a lot more than maybe it should be.

He didn't stare too long after that, getting up after a few seconds and offering her a hand which she took. He looked down at her hand, confused, and she realized she was shaking, his grip the only thing holding her steady.

"Oh, s-sorry. I didn't think I was—"

She burst into tears as the sudden emotions overwhelmed her.

"Woah, hey," his voice was so damn *gentle*. "It's okay."

His arms were around her, pulling her to him and she was crying into his shirt, letting out the sudden flood of emotions. She was genuinely glad he had seen but at the same time she was so afraid he would think she was monster for doing that herself. It was self-loathing and relief and fear all jumbled together, pouring from her eyes in messy streams, the sobs shaking her as she clung to him.

"You're okay," It was barely a whisper. "Shh. It's okay, El. I've got you."

He let her cry it out, not saying anything judgemental or stupid, and when the tears were finally gone, she pulled her head back and looked at him. He had that soft look in his eyes as he gazed down at her, arms still holding her firmly. Somehow she didn't mind, feeling her self concaving to fit against him more easily, moving to the balls of her feet to be closer as she clung to him.

*I should tell him to let go now. I should push him away.*

But she didn't, and instead her hands that were on his chest were moving up around his neck, pulling him closer as she tilted her head. He leaned down and she closed her eyes as she felt his lips meet hers, losing herself in the feeling. She was warm all over, fireworks exploding behind her eyelids as he pulled her to him, her lips gaping

open just the slightest bit, inviting him in. The kiss deepened and her heart was pounding and it felt so *right* and *good* and—

She pulled back, pushing away from him, gasping. Fuck. That wasn't supposed happen.

“Mike—”

He let her go and took a step back, eyes huge and full of sudden panic.

“El, I’m sorry, I—”

“That was my fault,” she cut him off, shaking her head. “Don’t apologize. I started it.”

They stared at each other in silence, feeling awkward. It hadn't been awkward all night but now it was. And it was her fault.

She kept distancing herself from him, telling him no, repeating her reasons why, trying to justify pushing him away. But underneath she’d known she was kidding herself. He was... perfect. Sweet, kind, understanding, gentle, respectful. A dream guy who shouldn’t exist or at the very *least* should not be interested in her. Denying it wasn't working and she didn't want it work. The logic and reasoning of why it was a bad idea faded away at the thought of his lips on hers, how he'd tasted and felt.

Perfect. Not the fake kind she pretended to be, but actual perfection, somehow possible through him.

The last of her resolve broke, the idea of keeping herself from him no longer an option. She wouldn’t let it happen. Not *really*. But she wanted to pretend it could, wanted to know what it would be like for even just a minute.

Her gaze went back to his lips before glancing up at his ebony eyes.

“We’re still just friends, okay?” She watched his eyes fill first with confusion, then clarity as he understood her meaning. “I’m not... we can’t *be* anything.”

“Okay,” he nodded. “ Just friends. I’m fine with that.” His voice was sure, eyes glowing.

He closed the space between them and she reached for him, shutting her eyes and letting go, losing herself to his smell and touch and taste. She clung to him and he held her, answering her kisses with a quiet passion that took her breath away, her lips widening, deepening the kiss as she let him in. It grew more and more intense by the second, all of the pent-up frustration flooding out of them as they gripped each other and tried to make up for the month and a half sexual tension. They somehow ended up on his bed and she tangled her fingers in his messy hair, keeping him close as he pressed down on her, making her moan into his mouth.

It was everything she wanted and more, having him be so close, being able to breathe him in, being able to feel him, his heart's staccato rhythm matching hers. She felt dizzy as she arched up, kissing his jawline while he nuzzled her temple, everything warm and easy and full of *him*.

He pulled back and she reached for him again but he caught her hand, bringing her palm to his lips. His kiss was soft, and then he pressed another to the heel of her palm, trailing them down the marks that marred her wrist, gently tracing his lips over them. It was a quiet message, that he accepted those parts of her too, and despite her resolve, tears filled her eyes.

“Mike,” she whispered, gratitude filling her voice.

Somehow he’d understood her fear of what he would think and here he was, kissing away the doubts. His eyes softened a bit and he crawled off of her so he was laying next to her and pulled her to his chest, wrapping an arm around her waist. The passion quieted into something gentler, and she let him hold her, let him into that sacred space in her heart where very few people dwelled.

The ice palace there was slowly melting and even though she’d just woken up after a solid eight hours of sleep, she found herself wanting to rest there, nestled into his body. To let the world disappear and just exist in his arms, even if it was only temporary. He pressed a kiss to the crown of her head and she shuddered, tucking her face into his

chest, refusing to move and ruin the moment. She would stay as long as he let her, wanting to bask in the feeling of contentment.

They missed breakfast.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

DISCLAIMER: i do not believe self-harm scars are ugly or gross. personally i view them as battle scars, not necessarily badges of honor but something that proved you fought and you won. i don't think they need to be covered or hidden.

el, however, is still in the process of accepting them and it is her point of view here so that's why that was written. no amount of scars can keep someone from being beautiful.

on another note LOOK AT THAT they kissed lmao

i didn't really think they'd have this perfect, romance movie kind of kiss. didn't feel right in this story. but i think it still meant something.

el talks about herself a lot in this chapter and sometimes it can be hard but i think it's so important to be open and honest about what you've gone through if you're comfortable enough to talk about it. i found it helps because i find other people who have similar stories and then i get to let them know they're not alone.

i hope you all know you're loved, even if it is by a crazed, exhausted, random fanfiction writer who's still learning to love herself. <3

things are going to speed up a bit after this. it's cute how some of you think we've reached the angst. ;)

## 7. Turn me on with your electric feel

### Notes for the Chapter:

guess who wrote two more chapters in the last two days? tHIS BITCH YEE HAW. you're lucky because once i have a plot, the best way to motivate me to keep writing is to post so there's going to be fairly consistent updates wooo.

sorry again for being so unresponsive to comments. i seriously adore them but i'm so tired i just read them and cry happy tears and then sleep. but i love them. i live for them.

also like, head's up. i rated this story explicit for a reason and while i'm not going to have like a gratuitous amount of sex scenes, there are physical aspects of the relationship that are going to be written in detail. kind of like... important to build a relationship and emotions and stuff. like the story doesn't center around it but it's going to happen so... if you're not into that, sorry? you don't have to keep reading or you can always skip over those parts. your choice.

also: HEY KIDDOS PLEASE DON'T DRINK UNDERAGE. there are irresponsible choices in this story that you like... really shouldn't emulate. like it's a story and i don't condone underage drinking. don't do that.

anyways now that i've semi-spoiled it, have a chapter.

As hard as El tried to keep her and Mike's... whatever it was... on the down low, Max of course found out. It's not that El wanted to keep secrets from her best friend, because she didn't. She just wanted a little peace and quiet to process what had happened between her and her supposed tutor. Some calm. A chance to breathe. Instead of—



*"You guys made out on his bed?!"*

El winced at the loud shriek and then reached over and smacked her friend on the arm, looking around the hallway self-consciously. They were pretty much alone and it was a big enough campus that no one would probably care, but she still didn't need anyone knowing her business.

"We didn't—" She tried to protest, but then sighed, knowing that was a lie. "—Well, okay, we made out, but only for like five minutes and then we just cuddled so don't do that thing where you make it into a big deal. *Please?*" she begged her friend.

"But you *made out with him*. How is that not a big deal? How am I not supposed to freak out a bit?" Max was crescendoing. "You haven't kissed a guy in years! This is *exactly* a big deal!"

They were outside now, heading for the parking lot where Dustin was meeting them with his station wagon. It was Lucas's twenty-first birthday and since she and Max were now officially members of "The Party", as they called it, they'd been invited to some bar downtown so they could watch him get blackout drunk or something. It had been a while since either of them had gone "out" anyways, and El had to go shopping and buy something she could wear, since she mostly owned leggings, long skirts, and long-sleeved shirts.

Not exactly party clothes. And definitely not cute.

Not that she had any good reason to want to look cute. It's not like she had anyone to impress.

El wasn't anti-social, but she knew herself well enough to know she would only have fun with the right people. And other than Max, she hadn't ever had the right people before, so really there wasn't any reason to own party clothes. It was a non-issue. A money waste, maybe. But suddenly she had a reason to be at the mall as Max threw dress after dress over the changing room door, tossing the rejects back and keeping a small pile of maybes. Searching for the perfect thing that showed enough skin, but not too much. Something to hide the scars but that didn't look like something a grandmother would wear.

And then the perfect dress had appeared. Long sleeves that reached her palms and hid her wrists, covered in silver sparkling silver sequins that twinkled in the dim lights. The hem hit mid thigh but had a slit up one side that offered a peek of slim leg without showing too much. Paired with opaque black tights and some knee-high boots, to keep those scars covered too, it made her look, as Max said, "Hot as fuck but not in an obvious way". El considered it a victory.

Smoothing the edge of her pretty dress, she sighed, trying to figure out how to explain to Max that whatever had happened between her and Mike wasn't... wasn't anything.

"It's just... it was once, okay? I was weak. He was right there. It was too easy. I even told him we were just friends and he was fine with it, so don't get too excited," she grumped as they walked across the darkening campus.

The late February breeze was definitely cold, but it a good couple of degrees above freezing and in comparison to how it had been, it felt downright pleasant.

"I still don't get why you won't date him," Max rolled her eyes.

"You know why. My dad will lose his shit if he finds out."

"That's not an excuse. You're literally becoming a psychologist behind his back, there's no reason why you can't secretly date someone too."

Max tugged at her skirt. It was a pleated thing, dark blue, and she'd paired it with with a cute red halter top and knee socks with a pair of her comfortable, plain black sneakers. She kind of looked like a naughty cheerleader, but that was the point, they were going *out* after all. Her fleece kept her covered and warm, and El felt little jealous for leaving her own jacket in the room, since it clashed with her outfit.

"I'm busy." That was true. "I don't have time for a boyfriend."

"Well, okay, but what if you fall in love with him?"

El missed a step and almost tripped over her own feet. *Oh fuck no.*

*Yeah right. Ha ha.*

“Don’t even say that. I’m not falling in love with *anyone*,” she didn’t dare look Max in the eyes. “I’m not even capable of that.”

“But you love *me*.”

Max looked at her with puppy eyes and she laughed and nudged her friend.

“Yeah, but you’re you. Not some dumb boy,” she argued. “I couldn’t not love you.”

“Oh, so Mike’s some dumb boy now?”

“How about we not talk about it.” El smiled winningly, quickly getting tired of the subject. “How about that?”

“God, fine, but you can’t keep ignoring it forever. There’s something going on between you two and honestly if you just dated him—”

“*Max.*”

“Okay, fine, I’m done.”

They’d finally made it to the parking lot and were standing at the edge, scanning for Dustin and his junkmobile, as he called it. The sun was down now and El shivered a bit, wishing even harder that she hadn’t abandoned her coat for the sake of fashion, but then headlights appeared and she sighed in relief.

Instead of the junker she had been expecting it was a semi-familiar silver Subaru and El swore internally. *Gandalf. Fuck.* Which meant she would be shotgun with Mike. Which, okay, wasn’t the worst thing ever, they were chill after all, but nonetheless it gave her some mild anxiety. How was she supposed to act around him now? He’d been nothing but kind and sweet, and his lips had been so soft against hers, his hands burning across her body as they pulled her closer—

“Hey!” Dustin opened the door, eyes on his girlfriend, interrupting El’s less than pious thoughts with his own. “Damn, you look good, babe.”

Max did look pretty hot. She'd put her long, usually messy red hair up into a ponytail and let El apply mascara and eyeliner, making her icy-blues absolutely captivating. El pretended she didn't see him grab his girlfriend's ass and walked past them, hopping into the front seat in the hope that ripping the bandaid off of the awkward scab would make it less painful. She even managed to make eye contact, looking over and taking in his nice, blue button-up and pair of khakis. His hair looked freshly washed and the powerful wave of clean boy-smell that rolled over her confirmed her suspicions.

*He looks so fucking good, hot damn.* The thought escaped before she could help it but she tried to move past it.

"Hey," she offered him a smile and hoped it wasn't as awkward as it felt. "I didn't know you were driving tonight."

He was staring at her, eyes slightly wider than usual, and she blinked, self-consciously tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She'd straightened it for once, so the honey-brown strands streamed down long and flowy, a silken sheet that fell framed her face and curved over her shoulders. Her eye makeup was silver and smoky to match her dress and she'd gone with a deep berry lip balm, not wanting to commit to lipstick. She was more done up than she'd probably ever seen her, and a sudden bolt of uncertainty struck her.

*Maybe it looks bad? I shouldn't have gone so dark with the eyeshadow. I probably look like an alien.*

He didn't blink, mouth gaping slightly.

"Um..." She waved her hand in front of his face, wanting the staring to stop, and he snapped out of it.

"S-Sorry, um, yeah. I wasn't supposed to but there's a good chance Dustin's going to get shit-faced and I'd rather drive my car than his so..." he answered the question but barely, turning and looking out the windshield self-consciously but still stealing glances her way.

"You're not going to get shit-faced?" she asked, a bit surprised.

"Nah, drinking isn't really my thing... I mean, sometimes I do, but

I've been trying not to, I guess."

"Not even for birthdays?" she pressed. *Wonder what a drunk Mike would be like.*

"I mean, I might have one drink to keep Lucas off my ass. But I'm hoping that being a driver will keep me from going too hard."

"Gotcha."

Just then, Dustin and Max climbed into the back seat and Mike quickly took off, answering Max's questions about where they were going, some bar called The Quarry that was kind of low-key but had good music and bar service. The auxiliary cord was dangling loosely from the stereo and El grabbed it, giving him a glance to see if it was okay. He nodded and she plugged her phone in, looking for a playlist and picking an 80s one. A familiar piano strain filtered through the speakers and she grinned, knowing she'd chosen well.

*"Tonight... gonna have myself, a real good time... I feel ali-ah-ah-iiiiive."*

"Oh fuck yeah! Turn it up!" Dustin yelled from the back seat. Mike reached for knob and cranked it, grinning over at her before turning back to the road.

*"And the woorrrrrrld! I'll turn it inside out—yeahhhh!"*

*And floating around... in ecstasy."*

All four of them were singing along, even Mike, and El found herself dancing in her seat, doing the hand motions her and Max had perfected back in high school. A kind of messy choreography that was the epitome of white girl foolishness. Max was in the back seat belting out the harmony.

*"So don't stop me now!"*

*Don't stop me... cause I'm having a good time, having a good time!"*

She was laughing, the whole car shaking as Dustin bounced in his seat, Mike tapping the rhythm on the steering wheel and moving his shoulders as he drove. El turned in her seat to Max, locking eyes as

they sang the familiar words.

*"I'm a shooting star leaping through the skyyyyyy,*

*Like a tiger*

*defying the laws of gravityyyy!"*

She was pretending to float, grooving out, tossing her hair around dramatically, too busy to notice Mike watching her from the side of his eye. His head turned, smiling as she danced in her seat, carefree and happy. It was captivating.

*"I'm a racing car passing by like Lady Godiva*

*I'm gonna go! Go! Go!*

*There's no stopping me!"*

The car was shaking, the friends rocking out inside almost louder than the music blasting through the speakers. El couldn't stop grinning, head banging and dancing, so lost in the happiness of the moment. She opened her eyes, looking out the windshield, and then screamed.

"Mike! Look out!" she shrieked.

Mike had been watching her, completely mesmerized, but his eyes returned to the road at her scream and he slammed the brakes, swerving into the next lane and barely missing the car that had slowed in front of them. Another car honked as it passed them and everyone was silent as he slowly got back up to speed, looking ashamed as he turned the music back down.

He sucked in a breath. "S-Sorry, guys."

"We almost just died," Dustin gasped dramatically. "What was *that*, Mike?!"

"I just... got distracted, sorry," he apologized again, clearly embarrassed, avoiding their gazes.

El realized she'd been clenching her hands and exhaled, trying to relax after the near miss. Too close.

"It happens," she tried to be sympathetic even though her heart was still pounding. "Um, maybe no more partying until we get there?"

Max soon overcame her shock and filled the silence, bitching about her shitty advisor who had put her in a class that wasn't even necessary. El stared down at her hands, wanting to pretend like she didn't notice Mike glancing over every now and then. It was obvious what had distracted him and she felt guilty. But she said nothing. Technically... it wasn't her problem. There was no reason for him to be staring.

She couldn't tell if it was flattering or unnerving.

They arrived downtown soon enough and Mike found a parking spot a block or two away before they crawled out and walked down the sidewalk towards the bar where Will and Lucas were waiting. It was Saturday night so the nightlife was bustling and El had to dodge through the people. Somehow crowds of people were oddly comforting, getting lost among fellow humans that didn't know your name or story. Just another person. Nothing to see.

Someone wolf-whistled behind her and she ignored it, figuring it wasn't for her, but then she felt a hand brush the back of her thigh.

"Hey!" she yelped, whipping around.

It was some guy, grinning wickedly, his hand still outstretched towards her body. There was a strong smell of alcohol and she realized he had to be stupidly drunk to think anything he was doing was a good idea. She slapped his hand away but his other was reaching for her too.

"Don't fucking touch me," she snarled, hackles rising.

"Aw, don't be like that," the man's eyes were dark, "you look like a sweet thing, come here."

His hand was on her wrist, trying to pull her closer and El tensed up, eyes narrowing. This wasn't going to happen, she wasn't going to let

it, but before she could react and kick and strike and get away, someone else did.

“Hey! Let her go, you bastard!”

A fist smashed across the random guy’s face and El watched, almost in slow motion, as he staggered backward, falling onto the ground. She turned, eyes wide and looked back at Mike, who was wincing and shaking out his fist, looking as pissed as she felt.

*Holy shit, I didn't know he could punch?* The amazement faded and turned into irritation. Did he think she couldn't take care of herself?

They all sped up, leaving the drunk idiot on the sidewalk behind them as quickly as possible. El stalked away angrily, the others having to almost run to catch up with her. Mike gave her a questioning look as he came up beside her and she couldn't hold in her frustration at his unnecessary actions.

“I could have handled that,” she said, voice accusatory.

He looked confused, then annoyed. “I don’t even get a thank you? That's like the first time I've ever punched someone!”

“I could have handled that,” she repeated, scowling. “It’s not the first time I’ve had a guy grab me. I know what to do.”

“Is that why you froze up?” he asked condescendingly, clearly hurt by her reaction.

She opened her mouth to let out an angry retort but Max grabbed her and pulled her along.

“Ellie, just say thanks. I would have smashed his face too but Mike beat me to it,” she threw her arm around El’s shoulders. “What can we say? You’re just so cute and precious we have to protect you from all the nasty men.”

El relaxed, realizing she was getting upset over nothing and let herself be pulled into the bar they had been heading for, feeling a little bit bad for getting mad at Mike *again*. It was too easy. If Max had punched that guy, she wouldn't have even blinked because...



well, that's something Max would do for her. But Mike doing that? Why should he? She didn't deserve that from him... it wasn't something he needed to do for her.

The bar was dark inside, blue and red neon lights lighting most of it, giving everything a purple glow, ethereal glow. Lucas was easy to spot, off the side a bit, and they quickly surrounded the standing table he and Will were at. El squeezed in next to Will and Max, trying not to notice Mike's look of disappointment as he ended up on the other side of the table from her.

It was weird. Part of her felt guilty, for not being closer to him and allowing him to protect her, but at the same time... he wasn't her boyfriend. They'd only made out once. It wasn't that deep, they were just friends. She had thought he'd understood that.

"So how drunk are you, birthday boy?" Dustin yelled to Lucas.

There was a dance floor on one side of the bar, filled with writhing people, some DJ pumping out high energy mixes of popular songs. A constant stream of clubgoers were coming and going at the bar, several bartenders flitting around like hummingbirds, and El realized they had one of the few tables in the whole place, though it didn't have any seats or stools. She'd never been to a place quite like this, but in her cute, new outfit and surrounded by her friends, she felt oddly in place. Like she was supposed to be there... her social anxiety quieted by the warmth on either side of her and the flash of sequins from other places in the clubs.

"Two drinks! But one was a beer," Lucas grinned, taking a sip of... whatever was in his hand. "I think I might do some shots next. You in?"

"Fuck yeah!" Dustin bellowed.

"Mike? Will?" Lucas looked at his friends, scheming.

Will grimaced and shook his head. "I'm driving you back, Lucas. And maybe the rest of you too. One of us has to be sober." He looked away. "You know I don't like to drink anyways, the whole my-dad-is-an-alcoholic thing?"

"Okay, fine, you're excused." Lucas shifted the aim of his conniving grin. "Mike?"

"I didn't want to—" Mike started to say but Lucas cut him off.

"It's my birthday, you asshole. Will is the DD. Come and do some shots!"

Mike was taller but Lucas outmuscled him easily and Dustin helped, dragging the moppy-haired young man towards the bar. He looked over his shoulder at the two girls and Will and mouthed "help!" but they just laughed and shrugged. They couldn't help him now that he was in Lucas's clutches.

Max sighed as they disappeared into the crowd.

"God, why is the drinking age twenty-one? I want to have fun too," she complained.

"They'll probably get you guys drinks. It's not like this place is empty enough for them to notice you're underage," Will spoke up. "Not saying I *condone* that, but I wouldn't be worried if I were you. Lucas wants everyone to have fun. That includes you."

That seemed to please Max and she settled down, striking up a conversation with Will about her own alcoholic family. El took the time to look around again, eyes landing on the DJ and the crowd below him. The music was loud, the bass thumping up through the floor, and El couldn't resist tapping the toe of her boot along with the beat. She'd never really lost her love to dance, even though she'd abandoned ballet all those years ago. Music still made her want to move, even if it was just a party mix of the current top 40 hits. Max noticed and smiled, pulling her friend closer so she could be heard.

"Should we hit the dance floor? I can tell you want to get your groove on."

"Maybe after the guys get back," El wavered, eyeing the hordes of people and noticing just how many men there were. "I'm not in the mood to get groped... again."

"Ooh, you going to make Mike dance with you?" Max's eyes

brightened. "Get some action on the floor?"

El rolled her eyes, trying to hide that she liked the idea. Getting some action sounded good. Maybe it could be an apology for snapping at him earlier.

"I don't think he knows how to dance," she told her, "I mean, he barely knows how to walk without tripping over his own feet..."

"Then you're the perfect teacher!" Max insisted.

Just then the three boys came back holding an entire *tray* of shots. Lucas and Dustin looked excited, passing them out to the girls before they could even ask, and Mike looked around the circle, clearing trying to be responsible.

"Are you sure they should—"

"Don't you dare poop on my party, Mike!" Lucas shouted. "Let the ladies have fun. And here," he shoved one of the tiny, brightly colored glasses into Mike's hand. "Loosen up a little."

Mike stared down at the shot glass and sighed, before pulling his keys out of his pocket and handing them to Will.

"I have a feeling you're going to be taking us all home," he sighed to his smaller friend. "Make sure I don't think I'm sober enough to drive, okay?"

El looked down at her own shot. Max had dragged her to plenty of parties in high school and they were fairly used to alcohol. Sometimes she would even sneak some of the cheaper alcohol from the well-stocked cupboard in her house. Papa never noticed if the cheap liquor disappeared, he didn't drink anything that cost less than two hundred dollars anyways, and they would fill fancy glasses with shitty bourbon and get drunk together in her room. It was a nice, numbing feeling that she didn't mind, even though Max always told her she was an obnoxious drunk. There was no one running to their table to check their IDs so she picked it up, toasting Lucas and then tilting her head back.

It was fruit flavored vodka, probably peach, and it had to be cheap

because it tasted like paint thinner and burned the whole way down. She grimaced.

“God, couldn’t you guys afford some Grey Goose? Or tequila maybe?”

Lucas guffawed. “Ayyy, it’s Sassy Eleven!” He grinned and then grabbed his friend’s shoulder impatiently. “Mike!”

Mike turned to look at him, a similar disgusted expression on his face after taking his own shot.

“What?” he asked dumbly.

“Get your lady a Grey Goose and Sprite!” Lucas demanded.

They flushed in synch and El shook her head as they spoke at the same time.

“She’s not my—”

“I’m not his—”

Lucas laughed again, clearly drunk and not caring for their weak protests.

“Shut up, you two. Mike, go get her a drink or I’ll make you take another shot,” he threatened.

“Lucas, she doesn’t want—”

“Eleven,” Lucas turned to her, looking serious. “Would you rather take another of these cheapass shots, or have an actual drink.”

“Um,” she swallowed, wanting to be honest. “Well... a drink would be—”

“There you go, Mike,” he puffed his chest out proudly. “Now get to the fucking bar.”

Mike looked like he wanted to argue but shut his mouth and turned around, muttering something under his breath as he made his way towards the bar. The only thing worse than regular Lucas... was

drunk Lucas. There was no arguing with him. Until he was drunk enough not to notice that people weren't listening to him, he would be on their ass all night. Dustin turned to Max.

"Babe, did you want a drink too?"

"Yeah, sure."

He left them too and Lucas grinned at the two girls.

"Okay, if you ladies do one more shot with me I'll leave you alone and promise not to ask for a threesome later when I'm shitfaced."

Max laughed. "How will you remember your promise if you're shitfaced?"

"Honestly," El cut in, giving him a look, "I will do anything if it means you'll never sexually proposition me ever."

"Deal!"

They did another round and El felt herself giggle as Lucas told a story about some crazy professor. Shit. She was already starting to get drunk, and it felt pretty good, the way the tension drained from her shoulders and how everything became ten times more funny. The boys returned with their drinks and Mike handed off the cold glass of clear liquid to El, giving her a worried look. Max snatched whatever fruity thing was in Dustin's hand and chugged half of it, laughing as he pulled her in for a kiss. They got gross and El turned back to Mike, guzzling her drink down. It tasted like plain lemon-lime soda and she gave him a confused glance, wondering if he had ended up wimping out.

"What'd you get me?" she asked.

"Um... Grey Goose and Sprite? I didn't know what you wanted... that's what Lucas said," he shrugged.

Taking another sip, she inhaled, tasting just the slightest bit of vodka. "It's good! You should try it, you can't even taste the alcohol it's so smooth."

“I probably shouldn’t—”

“Mike,” she made her eyes big, and puppylike, a tactic she’d never really used before but was drunk enough to try. “Please?”

He was powerless against her stare and sighed, taking the drink back and sipping it. His shot from earlier must have taken over and he let himself be talked into another one, since there were only three left. Soon enough they were equally drunk as he helped her finish her drink, laughing and singing Lucas happy birthday as he basked in the attention. They talked about their classes a bit, chatting and laughing and enjoying each other’s company despite the cramped and noisy location.

Everything was getting blurry and warm and El almost startled as she felt an arm snag her waist, looking over and realizing it was Mike. He pulled her closer, the sequins on her dress catching on his khakis, his hand warm and heavy on her hip.

“So,” he looked down at her with hazy eyes, drunkenly bold. “You let me buy you a drink... is that still a friend thing?”

She didn’t move away, she liked that he was holding her, that he was too drunk to realize that he was so close. Part of it was the alcohol, liking his attention, but it was mostly her real emotions, the ones she’d been hiding, that made her smirk, eyes lidded, and step closer, pressing herself against the front of him, feeling his lean form against hers.

“We should dance,” she said, setting her empty drink down and snagging his hand, pulling him toward the dance floor before he could answer. He followed her without hesitation, eyes bright and curious.

“Yeah, Mike!” Lucas whooped behind them.

El didn’t notice the surprised looks on their friends’ faces, her mind only able to focus on one thing at a time—and it was currently busy thinking about Mike, about how funny he was, how charming and kind. And when they’d been tangled on his bed, her body pinned beneath his as they kissed and gasped. He was behind her, letting

himself be led, and she turned to face him as they entered the dance floor. They were in the crowd and the beat was thumping up her legs and into her body, her hips moving, her arms lifting. She'd been trained classically, but she knew how to capture the rhythm and let it flow through her, swaying her hips alluringly to the beat. It was some drunken, made up choreography, but she knew she looked good, running her hand up and then down her body, eyes fixed on Mike as she bit her lip, wanting him to come closer.

Mike watched, stunned, but then her arms were on his shoulders, impatiently pulling him towards her, and he let instinct take over, setting his hands on her hips. Their bodies whispered against each other, almost touching, and he followed her movements, watching, completely mesmerized.

It made her feel, dare she even think it, *sexy*.

Whatever emotion coursing through her body made her want to pounce on him, her eyes fixated on him alone. He looked damn good under the lights, the purple neon accenting his high cheekbones and setting off his strong jawline, his hair like pure midnight in contrast to his glowing, pale skin. His lips were almost red in the light and she was struck by the sudden urge to taste them, to sink her teeth into them and she almost let the growling animal in her chest out.

Instead, she turned, pressing her ass back against him and swaying, feeling the button of his pants catch on her sequins. She leaned forward just a bit, rubbing herself up and down his body, wanting him to feel the heat that was pouring out of her in hot, heavy waves. He needed to make a move, before the feeling faded.

And he did.

At the first touch he had gasped, like he hadn't expected such intimate contact, but it only took him a few more twirls of her hips before he was pulling her back harder and grinding against her from behind. A groan left her throat and she leaned back up, against him with her back arched, her arms going up behind her to wrap around the back of his neck and encourage him. They stayed like that for the rest of the song, hungrily grinding and rubbing, trying to do *something* even though neither really knew what. El just knew it

felt good, and that she never wanted to stop.

His lips brushed her ear as the bass slowed and she shivered. "You're really beautiful," he mumbled.

They were both intoxicated, drunk enough not to care about the supposed boundaries between friends and whatever they were right now. It was a relief, for El at least, not letting the fears and worries get between them. He suddenly pressed a kiss to the side of her neck and her breath caught in her throat at the unexpected boldness. Turning around to face him, she felt desire erupt in her body, instantly craving more. Now that she had tasted his lips, they were all she wanted.

Their eyes met, he seemed to sense the urgency in them, and then they were moving off of the dance floor, past the tables and people, past the bathrooms. There was a hallway there, probably to the offices in the back, and he pulled her down it, their forms disappearing into the darkness.

His lips met hers hungrily, devouring her mouth as he pulled one of her legs up his hip, then the other. Her back hit the wall and she was wrapping her legs around his waist as his nipped and kissed down her throat, a high whine escaping her as her fingers dug into his shoulders. The softness and acceptance weren't the emotion that ruled them like the last time, this was pure desire, the feeling that had been building in both of them since that first mini golf date. A hand slid down her back, grabbing her ass to keep her from slipping down the wall, and she whined again, tilting her head up and giving him full access. His lips were soft, more frantic and sloppy than ravaging, but he was pressing her into the wall *hard*, their hips locked together as they panted in synch.

"Mike," she gasped his name, unable to help it.

He pulled back, breathing heavily, eyes lidded and lips wet. She couldn't pretend like she didn't want him, like she wasn't burning right now just for him.

"Is something wrong?" he panted, blinking his inky eyes, barely a glimmer in the darkness that surrounded them.



"No," it was a breathe. "Nothing is wrong."

She watched his face, trying to gauge what his emotions were. Everything felt fuzzy, but she could feel the warmth that burned inside of her, that he had created. He was so *nice* and made her feel so *safe*. It wasn't fair, just how good he made her feel, even when he wasn't trying.

"Thanks for punching that guy," she slurred suddenly, saying what she'd avoided earlier. He had been right, he deserved a thank you. He deserved a lot more too.

He blinked slowly, taking in her words. "I barely beat Max to it," he shrugged.

"You still didn't have to. I'm not..." she exhaled, letting her head fall forward against him, forehead pressed to his. "*We're* not anything. You don't have to do those kinds of things."

His hand, the one not on her butt, found her chin, tilting her face up. She gaped at the hunger and ferocity that etched his face into serious lines.

"Maybe I want to anyways," he countered, staring into her eyes intensely. "Maybe I like doing those kinds of things."

There was an unusual harshness to his voice, the closest thing she'd seen him get to angry so far, and she realized that despite his calm and understanding ways, he was frustrated. That was fair, she supposed, since she was currently pressed up against him in a dark hallway in a bar after making out and she *still* wouldn't let him be anything.

They couldn't be anything. They just *couldn't*. She knew she wasn't capable of that.

But... she could show him she was grateful at least. That she was sorry. That even though she wasn't letting him punch guys for her, she was still happy he was around her.

She loosened her legs and gently moved his hand, sliding down the front of him, barely stifling a gasp as she felt just how hard he was

under his jeans. She landed clumsily on her feet and made him switch positions, pressing his back against the wall with a drunken shove. She looked up at him, in the dim light, and licked her lips before grabbing the front of his button down and pulling him down to kiss her again, his hands finding her waist and pulling her against the front of him, sighing into her mouth in the most content way.

Everything was fuzzy and she felt so *warm* and she wanted to do something *more*—for him, to say thank you or to say sorry. Maybe both. A lot of things didn't make sense right now, but she knew what she wanted to do. Her hand trailed down his chest, to his zipper, and she felt him tense a bit. She broke the kiss and looked up again, her eyes soft. He blinked, unsure of what she was starting, but not unwilling.

“Mike,” her voice was almost a whisper. “You make me feel... warm. And good.”

She unbuttoned his pants, eyes searching his. He didn't stop her, his hands only gripped her hips harder as he watched. El moved carefully and slowly, knowing what she wanted to do, what she wanted to make him *feel*.

Warm. And good.

Her hand slid in between the edge of his boxers and and his skin, going lower and lower until her hand brushed his erection and his breath hitched. She paused, waiting, to see if he would say no or move her away, but he only shifted his grip on her, burying his face in her hair. Her fingers wrapped around his length, squeezing lightly to see what the reaction would be. He gasped, biting his lip to keep from groaning and she couldn't keep herself from smiling smugly, her unoccupied hand tugging his bicep lightly.

“Is this okay?”

“Don't stop,” he breathed, a pleading edge in his voice. “Please.”

She started to pump her hand up and down, watching as he gaped and grunted and tried not to be too noisy, since they were still sort of in public. It was ridiculously hot, the sounds he was making and the

way his fingers dug into her hips as he tried to control himself. She was doing that, making him like this, and there was some sort of satisfaction at that thought. She was the *only* one who had ever made him like this.

She began to move faster and he couldn't keep from panting, leaning heavily back against the wall, head buried in her shoulder to try and muffle the sounds of his enjoyment. Maybe it was too much too fast—they'd only made out once after all—but El knew what she wanted, feeling his dick twitching in her hand as he tried to keep the inevitable from happening. Her end goal.

"El," he groaned, his hand reaching out and snagging her wrist. "I'm gonna—I-I can't stop—"

"Then don't stop," she grinned wickedly, even though he couldn't see it, wanting to push him over the edge. "Or should I use my mouth?"

It might have been her persistence or maybe the image she painted for him with those words, but she felt him twitch again and then he let out a low groan as he came in her hand, hips thrusting once against her, hands squeezing her hips so hard it hurt. Slumping against the wall, it took him a moment to recover, chest heaving, his fingers loosening their bruising grip he looked down at her, eyes gleaming in the darkness. She pulled her hand out of his pants, looking down at it and blinking softly before wiping it on her dress like an afterthought. When she looked back up at him, he looked... hungry.

She felt herself smile, felt her own hunger yearn for his and then his lips crashed into hers and she decided to stop thinking.

## Notes for the Chapter:

ayyyyyy that cliffhanger tho.

you can annoy me in the comments about it if you want haha. i have to edit the next chapter up but it is done so if the mystery is killing you feel free to bitch at me about it. i love that shit.

again, don't drink until you reach drinking age wherever you are. that's bad. don't do that.

anyways the next like... four chapters? are kinda cute. then we're gonna hit the plot and have a good time aayyyyy. not really. we're all gonna suffer. woo hoo.

tell me your thoughts!

-g

## 8. So wake me up when it's all over

### Notes for the Chapter:

i was gonna update sooner but i had a bridal shower this morning and a wedding this evening and i'm cat sitting for the weekend and help i'm so tired i have a headache. but no classes or work tomorrow yEE.

anyways sorry for the wait with the cliffhanger. i hate cliffhangers when i read them but here i am writing one anyways.

i don't think this chapter is going to be what you expect but whATEVER

The room was bright. Too bright.

El groaned and rolled over, shoving her face back into the shadow that had been sheltering her before. Her head felt like it was floating above her, the world spinning, and she moaned out loud in protest. Fuck. She'd never had a hangover this bad before.

"Sorry, I can close the blinds if you want," a quiet voice said.

"Wha....?"

She sat up, startled at the realization that she wasn't in her room, and immediately regretted it as her stomach heaved.

"Oh fuck," she groaned.

There was a small garbage can conveniently put next to the bed she was laying on and she grabbed it as she felt something bubbling up her throat. Her stomach heaved again and she threw up, full force, wincing at the burn, eyes closed.

"Here."

There was a glass of water floating in front of her and she took it, staying hunched over the garbage can in her lap as she slurped down

the cool liquid. Her eyes were watering and she reached up and wiped them, realizing she was still wearing her makeup. The silver dress was still on too, and her tights. She must have passed out.

“What... happened?” she blinked, finally looking up at her savior.

It was Will, his face sympathetic, and then she looked around the unfamiliar, neatly organized room, realizing it was neither her own nor Dustin and Mike’s. She frowned, not able to remember how she’d ended up here or why or... anything? Her head hurt too much.

“What do you remember?” he asked.

“I...” she blinked, feeling stupid.

They’d gone to some bar for Lucas’s birthday. Mike had driven, Lucas had made her drink and then she’d been dancing. She remembered being in the crowd, pressed up against Mike, desire burning in her as they’d slunk down a darkened hallway, all hands and lips and burning touches. And she’d done something there, before they’d kissed so hard her face hurt, something she definitely was not ready to admit to anyone.

She swallowed heavily.

“We went out and I got drunk. We all did, right?”

“Yeah... I mean, I didn’t. But you definitely did. Um... do you remember you and Mike kind of disappeared?”

She felt her face flush. There it was... but how much did he know?

“Yes...”

“And when you came back you guys looked kind of... uh...” he trailed off awkwardly.

“Like we had just... made out? Yeah, um, we did,” she admitted, much more casually than she felt. Will didn’t look surprised but didn’t press further. She remembered a bit after that too, the memory coming back like a cold splash of water. “And then Max asked if I was having a good time being a fucking whorish bitch... she wasn’t

happy with us. With me.”

Will nodded, quickly filling in the rest.

“And then the two of you had that huge fight in the middle of the bar and I had to drive her and Dustin back to campus because *Mike* was totally drunk and when I came back Lucas was the most sober one between the three of you, which was good because you were totally slammed and basically just clung to Mike the whole ride back and he refused to let you go and Lucas was sick of it because he’d somehow sobered up. Which still astounds me...”

A sense of relief washed over her and she exhaled. So they didn’t know she’d totally given Mike a handjob in a dark hallway in a random bar? That was good. She remembered after that they’d started to make out again but someone who worked there had caught them and told them to move along unless they wanted to get kicked out. And she’d felt so embarrassed she wanted to get drunk enough that she didn’t have to feel anything.

So she had. She’d been hammered and when she’d made it back to the table Max had taken one look at the two of them and then lost her shit. Something about leading Mike on? And acting like a total slut? That sure did sound like something drunk Max would do.

After Dustin had pulled Max away from her and they left, she’d let Lucas get her totally wasted, drinking anything he put in front of her. And Mike hadn’t let her go the whole time, keeping her close to him, his arm warm around her waist, his lips on her forehead and cheeks, the smell of his cologne and the taste of tequila on his lips... flashes of memory but nothing solid enough to remember. Other than the the fact that it was him.

“So... um, why am I here?” She still didn’t remember how that had happened.

“Well... Lucas ended up passing out in Dustin’s bed, and uh, Dustin and Max locked you out of your room—”

“And *I’m* the fucking bitch,” she rolled her eyes.

“So, since Lucas’s bed was the only one left, I brought you here,” Will nodded as he finished the story. “Mike offered to give up his bed for you but he was so drunk he kind of sat on it for a second and passed out too. Good intentions but...”

Of course he’d been a gentleman despite being near blackout drunk. She smiled softly at the thought of him insisting on her having his bed even as he fell asleep. There was no way she deserved someone that great. Someone that thoughtful and sweet and—

“So... is something going on with you and Mike?” Will asked, reading her face. “I mean, Max looked pissed at the fact that you guys had... um, made out or whatever.”

“Max is an angry drunk. It runs in her family,” El explained, feeling oddly tired. “One time in high school she got in a fistfight at a party that *she* dragged me to and I had to literally carry her out.” She hoped it wasn’t obvious she was trying to deflect the question.

“But... why was she mad about you and Mike?” He quirked a brow. “Shouldn’t she be happy for you?”

El sighed, drinking more water and then wincing. If she focused on one thing, the world spun around, but when she moved a bolt of pain shot through her skull. Will noticed and reached for a bin on his desk, digging out some Advil and handing it to her. She took it and finished the cup of water, setting it down.

The questions weren’t helping either. The last thing she really wanted to do was be honest, but suddenly it seemed like the easiest way to make it all stop. And it at least it was Will. He was Mike’s friend first but she felt like he was her friend too now. Someone she could trust.

“Thanks, um,” she stared down at the floor for a few moments, gathering her nerve before confessing. “She’s mad at me because apparently I’ll make out with him, drunk or not, but I won’t date him.”

She heard him exhale heavily, like something had just clicked into place. The two didn’t see each other much, she’d found at one of her tutoring sessions when she’d asked Mike how Will was and he’d



replied he wasn't sure. The reason they switched out roommates every semester was because they literally got so busy they wouldn't see each other unless they lived together. So Will was mostly in the dark about their... situation.

"That explains why he was looking at you like that..." he mumbled more to himself.

She sat up a bit, suddenly alert.

"Wait, like what?"

"Like... you were the only person in that entire bar. Or in the world, really. Are you guys like... a thing or...?"

She sighed. It was bad enough trying to explain it to Max, but Will was Mike's friend, one of his *best* friends, and she felt guilty.

"There's a... mutual attraction. But I'm not..." she ran her finger around the edge of the glass in her hands. "I can't date anyone right now."

"Is that like, a personal decision?"

"Sort of? Um, my adopted dad, he's kind of strict and if he finds out I'm dating someone he'll make me go home before I finish college..."

"Wow, your dad sounds like he sucks more than mine," Will offered a sympathetic grin and she smiled back.

"Yeah, he's not great. I'm the eleventh kid he's adopted. He has this like—formula. To make successful adults out of orphans. So far I'm the only one who hasn't... gone according to plan."

She grimaced, at her headache as well as the sour memories, taking another drink of water.

"What's his formula for you? Or the desired outcome, I guess?"

"Brain surgeon," she sighed

Will frowned. "I thought you told me you were doing psychology."

"I am, um, but he doesn't know that. I'm going to graduate and get some well-paying job that requires a bachelor's until I can afford to go to graduate school and actually become a psychologist. But I'm on his dime right now, so..."

"So you're playing the part until you can be independent," he nodded, looking thoughtful.

"Yeah, so... I can't get distracted. Or let him find out that I... have feelings for anyone."

There was that tense silence that always followed when she talked about her dad. If her depression was a cloud, he was the thunderstorm hidden within. Even when he was nowhere near, there was still a feeling of dread at the mention of him.

"This is probably none of my business," Will put his hands up in front of him, "but am I totally crazy for thinking that making out with someone and not having labels and having to explain that is more distracting than just... dating someone?"

El winced. It wasn't an intentional jab, but it kind of hurt anyways. "Okay, that's fair. He's your friend. I get it."

"No, I'm not just, I mean—well, yeah a little," he bit his lip. "I've just never seen him... look at someone like he looked at you. Like ever."

He shrugged and she felt that tiny flicker of warmth light up her chest. She quickly bit back the smile that tugged at her lips, not wanting him to see. It wasn't something she was ready to admit to anyone.

"I... I don't know, Will. I could lose everything if my dad finds out," she risked a glance at him. "I really like Mike but..."

"But you don't like him enough," he said flatly.

She couldn't make herself meet his eyes as the shame and guilt hit full force.

"God, I am cruel. Max is right, I'm a whorish bitch. A terrible person," she lamented, setting the garbage can of vomit on the floor.

"I'm just... I'm stringing him along. And I didn't *want* to but he made that damn promise to tutor me and I can't—"

"Make him break his promise?" Will nodded. "I know that feeling. He wouldn't let you if you tried. I can see how that would make it harder."

"I was going to just push him away so this didn't happen but he won't let me. I don't want to... to fuck it all up."

The nausea had faded but she suddenly felt exhausted, slumping back onto the bed.

"What should I do, Will? He's so nice. And kind. And I won't lie and say I don't really, *really* like kissing him. But I can't *make* him go away," she whined.

"Maybe you shouldn't be so afraid."

"But my dad—"

"Not of your *dad*," he cut her off. "That's just an excuse. You're afraid of falling in love."

She sat up too fast and immediately groaned and lay back down, grabbing her stomach. Bad decision. But no, not him too, not with that... *word*.

"I don't fall in love. The only person I love is Max. That's it. So don't start with that idea because... it's not going to happen," she huffed as she tried to calm her stomach. "It's not possible, okay?"

"Why don't you think you can fall in love?"

He sat at the foot of the bed, looking at her and she huffed again.

"It's not that I can't... it's just that I *don't*. I'm too messed up for that," she clenched her hands into fists, nails digging into her palms. "I'm not capable of opening my tiny, shriveled heart. There's not enough room. I've been a frigid bitch since high school and that's all I'm going to be."

“Do you really believe that?”

“What else am I supposed to believe, Will?” She bit her lip, feeling a pang of sadness. “And besides, no one should have to put up with me. I wouldn’t wish myself upon anyone, especially not anyone as nice as *Mike*.”

Something inside cracked, tinkling like breaking glass on a concrete floor, but she took a deep breath, blinking back the sudden tears. Why was everything making her cry lately? Stupid emotions.

It was too much and she heaved out a sigh, shaking her head in defeat.

“I’ll... I’ll stop, okay? I’ll leave him alone. He’d stop if I told him to but I’m so weak, Will.”

“You’re not weak, Eleven,” he leaned forward, looking earnest. “You deserve to be loved too. It’s okay to want that.”

“Ugh, stop.” His words were hitting too close to home and she tried to deflect them with a bad attempt at humor. “You sound like the therapist I had to see back in high school.”

The understanding look on his face faded but he nodded, realizing he was reaching territory she wasn’t ready to talk about.

“Okay, fine,” he shrugged, getting up. “If you feel better you could head back to your room, but if you need to lay down for longer that’s fine too. I have a club meeting to get to.”

She watched as he grabbed his satchel and threw his laptop in it. He was a piece of normality that she longed to cling to. But he was right, laying around wouldn’t make her hangover go away and she’d rather lay in her own bed in something that wasn’t an itchy sequin dress with a rather gross stain.

“I think I’ll head back, um,” she frowned, “what dorm am I in right now?”

“Yours,” he chuckled. “You don’t have to go far.”

“We live in the same building and I never see you?”

“Maybe you aren’t looking.”

With that he left the room, leaving her with her doubts and worries and tender stomach. It took a few more minutes for her to muster the courage to leave, but thankfully when she arrived at her room a few floors up after the too stereotypical walk of shame, the door wasn’t locked and there was no one inside. Good. She wanted to process last night *before* Max tried to interrogate her.

But first... a shower. And clean clothes.

The hot water hit her face and she sighed, leaning into the spray and rubbing her arms up and down her sides, enjoying the feeling. She spat a few times, trying to get the gross taste out of her mouth. Her toothbrush was going to get worn out after today. At least the headspins had eased, a dull ache behind her eyelids the only pain left in her skull.

Other than the mental pain, of course.

She didn’t want to think about it. About what she’d done last night. Because it was complicated and weird and made her stomach clench with anxiety. There wasn’t any regret, even though she had been drunk, but mostly just... worry. She had definitely overstepped the boundaries she’d set for him and she didn’t know how to fix it. Would he want to fix it? Would he even let her?

It was Sunday and she needed to finish homework, but she still felt pretty shitty, making a nest of books and notes on her bed around her blanket. She tried to focus on the importance of research writing—her paper was on the effects of music on depression in adolescents—but her brain was tired and still achy and she found herself just laying there and thinking instead.

What the fuck was she going to do? She wouldn’t see him until Friday, hopefully, when she would spend two and half hours alone with him in a lab. Which was dangerous now that she’d had a taste of what they could be.

Now she couldn't stop replaying how hungrily he'd kissed her, pressed between her legs, mouth hot on her throat. And how he'd dug his fingers into her hips as she'd given him pleasure, leaving bruises that ghosted her skin from his grip.

A shiver traveled down her body and she quickly opened her eyes, frowning at how easily she was distracted. How was she supposed to try and be around him when she couldn't even keep her mind off of him when she was alone?

Flopping back onto her bed she let out a groan.

She was agonizing over her dilemma when the door opened and she sat up as Max came in. It was tense as El tried to figure out whether or not her friend was still mad about the night before. But Max grinned at the sight of her slightly-hungover friend, apparently forgetting her drunken words.

"Sleeping Beauty has returned!" She was holding a to-go container of what smelled like greasy chinese takeout. "How are you alive right now? I haven't seen you drink that much since that party at Brody Ashton's junior year! You were so fucked up."

El winced at the volume of her voice and shrugged.

"I... I don't know. Will gave me water and Advil since I was *locked out of my room* and had to sleep in his," she said pointedly.

"Oh, right, sorry. Sort of. Not really," she grinned. "Can I tell you how much fun drunk sex is? We could *not* stop laughing at like... everything. It was great."

"Ew, Max, please tell me you were on your bed," El begged, suddenly weary to be sitting on her comforter.

"Yeah, of course. Some things are still sacred. But seriously, get a man and get drunk and get busy because I haven't laughed that hard in so long."

She was almost bouncing excitedly and El winced at her enthusiasm.

"How are *you* not hungover? You had two shots and a drink."

“Well apparently you got more smashed after Dustin and I left. We had some pizza when we got back and that helped too,” she frowned suddenly. “Oh, sorry for calling you a whore last night.”

“Were you actually mad?”

“Nah, not really. I mean, I’m kinda mad you won’t date Mike but not like... that pissed. You really shouldn’t be making out with him like you did though.” Max crossed her arms, face serious. “Like the mixed signals things isn’t cool. Mike’s too nice for that shit.”

“Wait, does everyone know we made out?” El bit her lip, ignoring the rest of Max’s comment.

“Your purple lip balm was all over his face, Ellie. It wasn’t subtle.”

She grimaced. Of course.

“Okay, well, you’re right and Will already reamed me about it so if you could not also, that would be really great,” she huffed, turning back to her homework.

She felt Max’s stare, trying to ignore it, hoping it would go away.

“So... are you going to do something about it?” Max sounded exasperated. “Like, I don’t know, try talking to him for once?”

“I don’t know yet, Max. I’m still tired. I’ll... figure it out later.”

It was a shitty answer and they both knew it but Max shrugged and sat at her desk, pulling out her own homework quietly. They worked in silence for a bit despite the tension but the redhead couldn’t resist.

“You should date him.”

“Max!”

“Okay, okay! Sorry.” She hid a grin. “But not that sorry.”

“*Max.*”

“Right, sorry.”

## Notes for the Chapter:

i like el and will having a brother-sister relationship so yeah.

you guys hangovers suck so bad omg. i've never thrown up cause like i pace myself and also i have a really high tolerance but like waking up sucks. i'm the friend who holds the throwing-up friend's hair while drunk haha. anyways.

i've had like no time to write lately and i'm in a bit of rut creativity wise so even though i have the entire story lined out i cAN'T SEEM TO GET IT DONE and i am so furstartedalksjf;laksjd;.

haha i just realized that mike isn't even in this chapter... wow. sorry it's short but im so tired i'm trying to like space out the updaets till i can write some more.

anyways i love you all don't forget i'm gonna go pass out

-g



## 9. I hope that you catch me 'cause I'm already falling

### Notes for the Chapter:

this chapter is kind of short again but there's definitely action. i've got a few long chapters coming and i'm trying to space them out idk why. trying to keep the momentum.

i was so busy yesterday but i like posting a lot and seeing what you guys have to say. i live for it a little bit honestly.

ummmmmmmmm there's not a whole lot to say but you should read it k cool

El felt herself dragging her feet. She wasn't *trying* to, but she didn't know what to expect when she walked into the lab and she was anxious—the kind where an entire hive of buzzing bees swarmed her stomach. It was almost March now and the weather was less freezing and just cold, but she felt icy and sluggish, like a frozen stream. It's not like she didn't know why though.

The happenings in the corridor of the dark club weighed heavy in her mind.

She still wasn't sure if she'd made a mistake. So far there had been no reaction or even a glimpse of Mike—he'd been busy with his own homework she supposed—but she was nervous he'd been avoiding her. Not that she could blame him. It was *her* fault, she'd been the one to stick her hand down his pants after telling him only days earlier that they couldn't be anything. It wasn't fair to refuse to let him be something but still let him... well, *be* something. Was he mad at her? Did he not want to be her friend any more? Or... whatever they were?

It made the hands clutching her binder shake with apprehension.

The science building was in front of her and she tried to swallow the dread as she walked in through the doors, heading down the stairs,

her stained, white Chucks pattering softly on the floor. The light was on in the lab and she tried to ignore her heart pounding in her ears.

Time to face whatever consequences she'd created like a damn adult.

She walked into the classroom, gnawing her lip, and then blinked as she realized he wasn't anywhere in sight. Maybe he'd skipped out on her? That would definitely answer whether or not he was avoiding her...

There was a sudden clatter from the supply closet and wave of relief crashed over, figuring he must be grabbing something for their practice lab test. She went ahead and set her stuff in the usual area, creeping quietly towards the open door, curious as to what he was doing. There was another clatter and then a crash.

"Shit! Damn it..."

She stepped inside just as Mike—facing away from her—bent over poor Bonejangles, who was scattered in several pieces on the floor, his tibia skidding across the floor landing near her foot. It was obvious Mike's clumsy limbs had betrayed him—and Bonejangles—yet again. Bending down to pick it up, she realized Mike hadn't heard her come in and walked up behind him, reaching a hand out, feeling somewhere between relieved and nervous.

"Hey—"

"Jesus Christ!"

He flailed comically, his long arms reaching up defensively as he jumped a foot in the air and whirled around, holding up a femur in his left hand like a club. He looked ridiculous and she grinned at his defensive stance, barely holding in a laugh. The second he saw it was her he sagged, leaning back against the counter that ran around the side of the closet and clutching his chest.

"Holy *shit*, El. You scared me," he accused her, pouting in that adorable way that made his eyebrows all scrunched up.

"Um, sorry?" She was still grinning but held out the bone in her hand to him. "Here, uh, I think you dropped this."

He took it, not looking at it, focusing on her and she felt her face flush, the anxiety filling up her lungs, smile fading. The air was tense, filled with anticipation of... *something*. But she didn't know what. His eyes were unreadable, almost blank, and the he looked away suddenly, turning around and setting the leg bones on the counter.

For a moment it was silent as they both stood there. Unmoving. El gulped.

"Mike..." she reached a hand out, unsure, brushing his sleeve, fingers tentative to touch. "Um, are we... are we good?"

He spun back around, eyebrows raised, staring down at her, and she pulled her hand back in surprise. This time, though, she could read his eyes, recognizing the hunger that was suddenly pouring out of them. Her mouth gaped open and she was about to ask another question but he didn't give her the chance.

He crashed into her, pulling her face to his, cupping her cheeks, and she gasped into his mouth as he kissed her. Her whole body warmed as she kissed back, inviting him in and reaching up to wrap her arms around his neck. She gasped again as he lifted her, like at the bar, turning and setting her on the edge of the counter and pulling her long skirt up to her knees, so he could stand between her thighs, pressing her hips to his. He groaned against her lips as she wrapped her legs around his waist and buried her hand into his hair, tugging him down desperately.

The uncertainty and anxiety faded as El lost herself to him, letting him invade her senses, gripping at his shoulders and hair. It felt right. It had felt right at the club, hazy and warm and slow, but even without the alcohol depressing her reasoning and logic, it still felt... so *right*.

They pulled back, panting, and one of her hands slid up the front of him, under his shirt, feeling his smooth skin. Her skirt hitched up higher as he pulled her closer, bunching around her thighs as they frantically ground against each other. Her lips whispered across his jaw, tongue flicking his earlobe as she explored the expanse of his neck, inhaling deeply, trying to memorize the heady scent of him.

“Oh, fuck,” he groaned as she latched onto his neck, nibbling his jawline again. “Holy shit.”

This wouldn't be happening if it hadn't before, their drunken make out confessing to each other what they couldn't say. El knew that, but she didn't care, and he didn't seem to either. A fiery need burned between them as they burned trails across each other, his hand sneaking up her back, under her sweater, teasing the back of her bra and fiddling with the hooks.

He unsnapped it and she pulled back from his lips, eyes wide, surprised. How did he know how to do that?

“Um, sorry, is that not okay?” he asked, brow furrowed, reading her surprise as hesitation.

The fire was burning low in her body and she didn't want to stop, not even a little bit. She didn't say anything, instead grabbing his other hand that was on her hip, slipping it under the front of her pink, crushed-velvet, long sleeve shirt. He looked down, mesmerized, but kept moving up, cupping her breast and squeezing gently as she hissed, eyes half-lidded, encouraging him. She leaned up to kiss him and caught his bottom lip between her teeth, tugging on it and watching as his eyes narrowed and he squeezed a little harder, thumbing her nipple. Letting his lip go, she leaned back, closing her eyes all the way and whimpering.

It felt so good, letting him touch her, and she *reveled* in it, gripping his shoulders as he explored, his breath heavy. Clearly he was just as affected by the new closeness as she was, panting hotly against her ear as she whimpered.

His lips were on her neck and collarbones, kissing and nipping as his other hand slid up her thigh. She jolted, a bit surprised at how bold he was being, but then his fingers brushed her panty-covered core and she *moaned*, reaching up to cover her mouth in sudden embarrassment. He pulled back enough to grin at her and she playfully pushed him away, gasping as he pressed hand against her again. It was surprising—the whole sudden makeout was surprising to be fair—but definitely not unwelcome.

It became clear after a minute of awkward fumbling, however, that he wasn't entirely sure what he was doing, or what he should do, and she took pity, pulling his hand away. The idea was nice, but they weren't really in a place where she could help him. He protested with a sigh, like he felt bad for being inexperienced, letting his hand settle back on her leg.

"But you—I mean at the bar..." he was frowning, "I thought I would return the favor?"

El found his hand and gave it a squeeze, resisting the urge to kiss him for his sweetness. "It's not something we have to be even at, Mike. I didn't do what I did that night because I wanted you to have return it. I just... wanted to do something for you," she assured him, biting her swollen lips. "And honestly... on second thought I'd rather not get into it too much here, like, in a supply closet. Where anyone could walk in. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, of course," he immediately tried to step away, trying to respect her sudden boundaries.

She didn't let him, wanting one more moment with him, pulling him into another kiss that he happily surrendered to, holding her again closely. They couldn't continue right now but she wanted to let him know she appreciated him. That she wasn't regretting it anymore than he was. When she pulled away she let herself smile, pressing forehead to his and letting out content sigh, feeling him nuzzle at her with his nose before she finally let him go and scooted back.

"You're seriously an amazing kisser," she told him as she reached back and rehooked her bra, tugging her shirt down too. "Have you really only had one girlfriend?"

"Um, yeah," he was fighting a triumphant smile. "I mean, you're pretty good too, for, uh, not having dated anyone."

He was trying smooth his hair down, tugging at his uncomfortably tight jeans and stepping back so she could hop off the counter. They were both pretty disheveled but he helped tug her skirt back down and smoothed it over her hips, letting his hands linger before giving her back her space so they could both catch their breath.

“Oh, thanks. I mean, I messed around with some guys back in high school,” she was casual but didn't want him to think she was *totally* innocent, wiping at her face. “But that was just... me attempting to plug up the black hole of depression. There like... distractions. Didn't really help back then.”

He seemed slightly surprised at her confession, but not upset. It felt right that he should know she wasn't some super pure, untouched angel. She truly hadn't ever dated anyone, but she'd definitely made out with guys before in dark corners at parties when she'd felt lonely enough to let them try. But she'd never slept with any of them, they'd never been that important. They really had just been distractions and she wasn't even sure if she could remember any of their names.

But she had a feeling she wouldn't be forgetting Mike any time soon.

“So...” he started, fingers fiddling with a set of phalanges sitting on the counter.

“So?” she asked, curious what he was asking.

He looked embarrassed. “Does it help... now?”

The question took her by surprise and she wrinkled her brow in thought, trying to think of a good response. It wasn't that simple.

“I mean... I have better ways to cope with my depression now. But —” she crossed her arms and looked up at him, eyebrow quirked. “If you're asking if making out with you makes me happy, it's obviously a yes. Why do you think I keep doing it when I shouldn't?”

He looked confused, a shadow of hurt darkening his eyes as he stood up, holding another piece of the dismembered skeleton.

“Wait, why shouldn't you be making out with me?”

“Uh, because I won't date you?” Her heart clenched at the words, and she couldn't meet his eyes. “Or get serious or anything?”

“So?” He blinked. “I told you I was okay with it. It's not like you blindsided me with it.”

Now she frowned, annoyed that he wasn't getting it.

"Well you shouldn't be, Mike. You're like... super nice. And funny. And... genuine. You deserve to have an actual girlfriend and not a— a whatever the fuck *I* am," she said, unable to hide the disgust she felt at herself from filling her voice. "You deserve to have a nice normal... person. One you can take home to your parents and marry and have kids with someday."

"Woah back up."

His hands were on her shoulders as he stared down at her, making her look at him. The way he was gazing down at her made those damned butterflies swarm her stomach and she swallowed. She'd only told the truth. He deserved more than the scraps she gave him. But the intensity in his eyes made her swallow her self-disgust and listen.

"Why should you be okay with it if I'm not okay with it? You don't think you're worth having an actual boyfriend too?" His gaze softened. "Do you think I don't *want* to date you? That I'm only in this to makeout with you or whatever?"

"I—"

"Because I do *want* that but... I respect you, El," his voice was soft, "and if this is all you want from me, honestly I'm more than happy to just be this."

"But Will said—"

"Will means well and he's known me for a long time but..." he shrugged. "Whatever he said doesn't cancel what I'm saying now. I'm okay being this with you if, um—" He was suddenly nervous. "If it means I get to be with you at all, I guess..."

"That's dangerous, Mike," she pulled from his grip. "I can't make promises or be what you want me to be—"

"What do you think I want you to be? I'm not your dad, El. I don't expect anything from you," he snagged her waist, drawing her close again. "If you think I want something perfect, you're wrong. I just want *you*, however you are and however much you want to give me."

I don't expect some perfect idea of what two people should be. I just know I like you and I want to be around you."

She bit her lip as the happiness and warmth she'd been trying to squelch and ignore and push away suddenly burst out of her, her entire chest warm at his words. How did he always know exactly what to say? Her hands reached up, grabbing his face, and she pulled him down to her, kissing him and letting the feeling flood through her, relaxing against him.

*I want you so much*, she tried to tell him, knowing the words were too scary to leave her lips anytime soon. But it was true. And for the first time since he'd first admitted he liked her, it didn't send an icy spike of fear through her. It just made her more warm.

He seemed surprised but didn't hesitate, reciprocating and wrapping his arms around her, smiling against her lips, almost ending the kiss and then adding another and another, neither wanting to stop. When they pulled back and she stared down at the floor, trying to hide the smile, feeling suddenly shy. She'd been fighting it for so long but suddenly... she didn't want to anymore.

"So..." She shuffled her feet. "You're sure okay with this? No label, nothing official? I can't do that..."

Yet, she added silently.

"Yes," he said firmly. "I'll be whatever you want, El. I kind of, um, just like being with you so if you're happy I'm okay with that."

*I don't deserve someone like you*, something inside her whispered. But she rationalized that this would be okay since he wasn't trying to be anything. Just friends. Good friends maybe.

She stared up at him, feeling soft and warm. "How are you an actual, existing person, Mike Wheeler?"

He opened his mouth to give what would probably be some stupidly scientific answer but she didn't let him, bringing him down to her lips again and losing herself in the feeling. His arm snagged her waist, pulling her dangerously close and she yelped. It would be so



easy to give in again but they'd already wasted half an hour of precious studying time and she actually did need help.

"Mike!" It was a laugh as he nuzzled his face into her neck, making her shiver with his tickly kisses. "We need to study, I have a test on Monday, remember?" She wasn't ready to give in to him when she felt this... open. "And besides, I'm guessing Bonejangles wouldn't appreciate us making out on his scattered phalanges."

"Aww, okay," he grinned as he pulled back, pretending to look sad.

She giggled but stepped away from his warm arms and they both started to pick up poor Bonejangles, setting him on the counter. She felt something prod her in her back and turned around, confused. Mike was grinning, eyes dancing and she looked down at the ulna that he was poking her with.

"You sure you don't want to bone?"

"*What?!*" she shrieked, getting the joke but not believing he actually had the audacity to say it out loud. "You did *not* just say that to me, Michael E. Wheeler!"

She grabbed a rib from behind her and pelted him with it as he flinched away, still grinning like the huge dork he was. Soon it became a battle and poor Bonejangles was soon scattered across the floor again, Mike's snorty, stupid laugh and El's giggles filling the lab for the next two hours as she reveled in the warmth that surrounded them and filled her up like sunshine in a meadow.

Part of her was afraid, of what this might mean, but the bigger part of her just... couldn't care. She was being selfish and stupid and a terrible person but she didn't care.

She felt happy.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

hmmm what are you doing el? aren't you supposed to not being do that??

next chapters are longer i think but i'm going to be

busy the next few days with school and thursday i'm seeing it and boy am i scared. i'm gonna pee. ugh.

so i can't promise an update until friday at the soonest but i've been chipping away at the next few chapters and boy are we in for a wild ride.

i love you all.

-g

## 10. How can I love when I'm afraid to fall?

### Notes for the Chapter:

i'm such a pushover honestly i couldn't resist.

i'm just so excited to get to the drama i keep pushing myself to write more and post more and aaaAHHH.

also i busted my laptop and the part to fix it won't be in until next week and right now i'm using my external hard drive and it's slow and it sucks and i hate everything but thankfully i have google docs on my phone so now i type everything there. which sucks. ugh.

aNYWAYS if you haven't checked out dee (lovelysarcastic)'s new story you should because it's a phenomenal college au and i adore it and yeah shameless plug. ;)

It was nearing the end of March and every now and then there were days that were warm, the sunshine shining through the trees where small, green buds were peeking, the promise of coming spring. It wasn't only the weather that was warm, but lately she'd felt warm *inside* too—which was totally foreign.

El basked in it. Part of her was still hesitant and she held back, but Mike's acceptance and affection didn't waver even when she spooked and pulled away. He let her go, trying not to be too affectionate in public or outright around their friends.

But it was impossible to miss the way they leaned towards each other at the table, the warm way he looked at her as she talked, the way she bit her lip shyly when he smiled at her. They were a little sickening and Max and Dustin gave them hell for it whenever they had chance. Mike had managed to get them to tone it down, but the knowing look Max gave her when they were alone was enough to make her want to slap her best friend across the face. It was a good thing she loved her.

For the first time in a long time she felt... good. She woke up and didn't dread the day, instead looking forward to lunches or free periods when she would meet up with Mike and just hang out, doing homework in silence but... together. She blamed it on the warming weather and her easy classes, deciding the respite from her usual black cloud was just a good mood that would soon pass by. But it didn't.

*Knock knock knock!*

She was laying in her bed, propped up by her pillows and stuffed animals, her laptop in her lap as she indulged and watched another episode of Criminal Minds. It was her favorite show that she'd discovered last semester. She'd only recently started watching tv shows and movies now that she had a laptop, after Dustin had typed in his Netflix account and given her a list of movies and shows to watch. So far she'd only really watched Criminal Minds and the Jurassic Park trilogy, but she paused it and turned to look at the door.

"Come in?"

It was a question because she didn't know who would be knocking so late. Max was at Dustin's and El knew she wouldn't knock anyways, so she felt surprised, hoping it wasn't someone she didn't know.

The door opened and she blinked as a familiar dark, mopy head appeared, looking unsure.

"Um, hey, El." A tentative smile graced his lips, his eyes automatically softening at the sight of her despite the odd situation.

"Mike?" She shifted the laptop out of her lap, surprised but not really upset. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, um..."

He walked all the way in, holding up a backpack and a note, looking sheepish. She could see the familiar scrawl from where she was sitting and realized why he was here.

"They exiled you?" she grinned, laughter crinkling her eyes.

“Yeah, I got up and left to pee and the horndogs locked me out in the two minutes I was gone... they didn’t even give me my laptop,” he sighed, clearly feeling betrayed. “If they had asked me to leave I would have! They didn’t need to be so passive-aggressive... I can respect privacy, y’know!”

The two of them were at ease enough now that he threw his stuff onto Max’s desk and then sat down in the chair with a huff, emptying his bag and seeing what the two rude lovers had packed him. There was a half-eaten bag of chips, some vanilla wafers, three packs of smarties, and an apple. And a single pair of boxers. He groaned.

“What’s wrong?” she questioned.

“My roommate is an *actual* asshole,” he complained. “He packed me nothing but food, not even my toothbrush! I wanted my laptop so I could keep working on my st—”

He turned away and cut himself off abruptly. Too abruptly. Closing her own laptop she looked at him through narrowed eyes, eyebrow raised. If that didn't scream "I have a secret!", she didn't know what would. And she knew she could get him to tell her.

Her voice was casual. “Work on your what?”

“N-Nothing,” he sputtered, suddenly flustered, more than flustered than her simple question deserved. “I... I mean, um, something but nothing. Don’t worry about it. It’s dumb. And boring. Nothing of interest here.”

“Okay, now you *have* to tell me,” she wheedled with a grin, sitting up and throwing her legs over the edge of the bed.

She was wearing the pajama shorts again, but she didn’t even think about her scars. By this point he’d seen them several times, during makeout sessions in the supply closet or movie nights in their dorm room. It was something she didn’t have to worry about anymore, a foreign feeling of security in the form of the tall, dark-haired, *nervous* dork on the other side of the room.

Mike looked like a cornered gazelle staring down a lion's mouth, his

adam's apple bobbing as he tried to swallow whatever emotion was suddenly clogging his throat. She frowned and crossed her arms, realizing he seemed uncomfortable, which hadn't been the goal. Sure, she wanted to know, but if it was something he wasn't ready to talk about, she wouldn't push it.

"I mean, you don't *have* to..." she recanted, "but you know I'm the last person who will ever judge you, right?"

He swallowed again, some of the apprehension fading as he saw her soften. "No, you're right, El. I just... haven't told anyone. Not even the guys... It feels stupid, I don't know. They'd make fun of me, maybe."

"Well," she stood and crossed the room, sitting on the desk in front of him. "You might find this hard to believe but... not only am I amazing at listening and not thinking things are stupid, but I'm also crazy good at keeping secrets."

"You won't tell?"

"Not even Max." She paused but licked her lips and continued, feeling her set of nerves flare a bit before she let the words she knew he would trust leave her mouth. "*I promise.*"

His eyes flew wide at the phrase and then he grinned so broadly it looked like his face would break. Sure, she'd told him how she never promised anything ever, how they seemed dumb and just another way to be disappointed. How she didn't really believe in them, or at the very least, making them. But she knew what it meant to him and wanted to reassure him, in a way he would understand that his secret would be safe with her. It seemed he fully appreciated her sudden use of his sacred word.

"Okay, fine—I'll tell you but..."

He grabbed her abruptly and pulled her off the desk and into his lap in one smooth move. She let out a tiny yelp of surprise at the sudden shock of almost falling, but then his arms wrapped around her, keeping her close and safe. If it had been anyone else and any other situation, she would have ripped his eyes out, but the happiness that

bloomed on his face made her decide he could live. And also... it was kind of comfy, he was warm and she could lean her head on his shoulder, resting safely in his embrace.

"There." He sounded almost *too* pleased. "I just wanted to be comfortable." She rolled her eyes at his blatant lie but he continued, ignoring her sass. "But, well, okay so... basically... you know how I'm a huge nerdy dork?"

"Obviously."

"Well, me and Will and Lucas and Dustin used to play D&D, um, we still do sometimes over breaks—"

"I knew that," she perked up. "Dustin told me. It honestly sounds kind of fun. I don't get the weird stereotype that only weirdos play it in their basement."

Mike stared at her blankly, and she felt her face heat up, realizing she'd said something wrong. "Um, what?"

He snapped out of it and then cackled and El flushed even brighter, embarrassed to the point of trying to struggle out of his arms, but he held her tight and then shook his head, taking a breath to calm himself.

"Oh, god, sorry, El. That was too good. Like..." He was still grinning and despite her irritation at feeling like an idiot, she was curious as to what was so funny. "The thing is, we used to literally play it in my basement. And we were weirdos."

"Oh," was all she managed to say, and then she couldn't help but let out a snicker, seeing the obvious irony. "Okay, that's funny. I get it... but get to the point."

"Well, I'm Dungeon Master. Which means that I'm—"

"The one responsible for creating the stories and actions for the other players to pass through? I know what a Dungeon Master is, Mike. I'm not surprised it's you."

"You're not?" His eyebrows disappeared under his dark bangs.

"Well, yeah. You're smart and good at telling stories. You're ridiculously smart and have a damn near photographic memory so you'd have not just the rules memorized, but probably everyone's stats as well. *And* you care enough to make sure everyone has a good time and nobody's left out... makes sense to me."

He was looking at her a bit stunned and she realized how nice she was being, feeling embarrassed again and quickly covering it with a barb.

"So, anyways, you're a colossal fucking nerd? That's not a secret, Mike."

"Uh... right," he was still a bit stunned by all of the niceness that she'd poured on him but managed to keep talking. "Well, I've realized lately... I like telling stories. Like a lot. And I love science and experimenting and acoustics and sound waves but... I took Creative Writing last semester, to fill a general credit I needed and..." He bit his lip. "I *loved* it, El. Like a lot. The teacher said I had raw talent and if I worked at it I could maybe... be an author. Like of actual books. That people would read."

Her eyebrows flew up her head and she couldn't pretend she wasn't surprised. She had pictured him as such a science guy that it was a bit of shock to find out about his secret passion. But the wild hope that filled his eyes made her smile and she let it feel real on her face, proud of him for being honest about what he loved, pressing a kiss to his temple and wrapping her arms around his neck.

"That's amazing, Mike. Really. I think you should explore that," she said honestly, leaving the usual sarcastic tone out.

"I mean... that's only part of the secret." He bit his lip but seemed encouraged by her smile. "I've been working on this story... it's kind of lame, but—"

"Tell me," she coaxed him.

So he told her everything. His idea about an adventure novel about four best friends in the 1980s who get sucked into an alternate dimension in their board game that ends up being just like the game



they were playing, characters and all. How they have to work together to defeat the monster stalking them, help others they find trapped in the game, and then find a way home through the board again.

“It’s really rough, I only have bits and pieces of the plot and I need to like... figure out the details of the characters more exactly so they don’t all have the same personality. But... I think it could *be* something, you know?”

His face was lit up, eyes shining with excitement and she nodded happily.

“It sounds like something I would actually read, especially when I was younger. Really cool, Mike.” She nodded, hoping he knew she was being sincere. “You should keep working on it.” She paused, considering, wondering if it was a good idea but then pressing on. . “I could help if you want... maybe figure out some of the characters or something?”

It seemed fair. He was helping her. Why wouldn’t she want to help him? It sounded fun too.

“You... would want to help?” he seemed surprised.

“Well, yeah. If you’re okay with that.”

“I’m way more than okay with it,” he grinned again, pressing a kiss to her nose, which she scrunched up in annoyance, starting to get a little tired of how sappy it was.

He seemed to realize her discomfort, his lips moving down to hers and she sighed, relaxing against him as he held her firmly in his lap. She kept her arms around his neck, having to twist her entire spine to get into a good enough position to kiss him back, but feeling that surge of happiness nonetheless. His hand crept up her leg, fingers brushing the edge of her shorts suggestively, his tongue swiping across her bottom lip, a question, searching.

It would be so easy to take the next step with him, to pull him to her bed and tug off their clothes and let him in all the way. Part of her

wanted to, part of her was *burning* to, but the logical part kept winning. It was a bad idea, to let herself or him get so attached. And while she wasn't saving her virginity or anything, she knew she wasn't sure yet if having sex with him was a good idea. It seemed like a good idea to horny El, but regular El still wasn't convinced, so she decided to keep it PG, at least for right then. Maybe something else could happen later when she was feeling less mushy.

Pulling back a little, she reached down and gently slid his hand down back towards her knee, smiling playfully so he would know it wasn't a bad idea, just maybe not great timing. She glanced over towards her bed, where her open laptop was still waiting for her to return.

"You interrupted my episode, by the way."

He didn't seem upset by her casual rejection, loosening his grip and pulling back.

"Oh, sorry, what were you watching?"

"Criminal Minds. It's super interesting to try and actually diagnose the different disorders and stuff. I mean, I know most of it is bullshit but like... I love it. I'm going to marry Spencer Reid, I swear," she sighed dreamily, half joking. Spencer was cute after all.

Mike pouted at her words.

"Really? You're going to tell me about your love for another man while still in my arms?"

"Oh, shut up," she teased back. "You and him are both huge nerds anyways. Practically related..."

She stood up, hopping off of him, and walked back towards her bed. Glancing over her shoulder she caught sight of something on his face, in his eyes. Was it... jealousy? She blinked and it was gone and she decided she must have imagined it. She'd been kidding. Did he really think she would marry some fictional TV cop when she wouldn't even *date* him? Surely she was imagining things.

Instead of dwelling on it she jerked her chin towards the desk where his upturned backpack still lay. "Hey, if you bring those chips over

here, I'll let you finish watching with me," she offered, deciding cuddling sounded nice as long as he didn't make her feel too mushy again. "It's a good episode. Some lady is killing men and turning them into fertilizer for her garden."

"Ooh, are you offering to share your bed with me?"

"Only if you can find a way we can both watch comfortably," she challenged with a grin.

His brows furrowed in determination and he smiled crookedly, grabbing the bag of chips and walking over to her.

"I know a way," he assured her as he sat down first, leaning his back against the pillows that cushioned against the headboard. He moved his legs apart and patted the space between them.

"Come here," he said, holding a hand out to her, voice affectionate and warm, eyes soft.

Her heart sped up for some reason but she did as he asked, plopping down between his legs, facing away from him. His arms wrapped around her waist from behind and she squeaked as he pulled her back towards him, even closer, nuzzling the side of her head with nose, breath warm. It was just as closed as before in his lap, but admittedly much more comfortable. She relaxed against him and then put her laptop in her own lap, tapping the keyboard to wake it up. The screen popped up as some man onscreen screamed in terror, frozen in a pause.

"Can you see?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder at him.

"Perfectly."

His breath tickled her ear and she tried to ignore the heat that flared up between her legs, as he held her firmly, hands on her waist. Oh, now it was happening? Now that she'd already turned him away? Nothing about the position was really that sexual, a low burn that had started when he'd told her to come closer was turning into a raging wildfire that was getting hard to ignore. She tried to focus on the show, the agents on the screen racing to a scene as their eccentric

tech typed frantically at her keyboard. El bit her lip, but the burning didn't go away and she shifted uneasily, pressing her thighs together. What the hell was wrong with her?

Despite her love for the show she couldn't stop fidgeting, feeling restless.

"Are you okay?" Mike's voice was warm in her ear. "If you're uncomfortable I could move."

"No, you're fine. I'm just..."

He couldn't see her face but it was heating up and she bit her lip, not wanting to admit what was going on.

"Just what?"

She didn't know how to reply but she *knew* what she wanted, and she knew they had the time and privacy to indulge this time, so instead of trying to explain she decided to act. His arms were around her waist and she grabbed his right one by the wrist, tugging it down so his palm was resting flat on her stomach. Then she put her hand over his, guiding him lower, to the waistband of her pajama shorts.

"El...?"

His voice was soft but curious and she answered his unspoken question as she slid both of their hands under her waistband, under her panties, guiding him to the spot between her thighs. She let out an involuntary gasp as his fingers made contact with her heated core, wet and ready for his touch, leaning her head back against him. She heard his breath catch in his throat as her thighs twitched, leaning back against him heavily.

"El, I... I have no clue what to do..." he worried.

"I'll teach you," she whispered back, soothing and sure.

She did, her hand guiding his and showing him where to put pressure, how to move his fingers and use his thumb at the same time. She whimpered to encourage each right movement and soon enough she lifted her hand away, falling back against against him as

he worked her with his fingers, quickly picking up on what worked best.

“Is this okay?”

“Y-Yes,” she breathed, fingers clenching, bunching up his pajama pants in her hands.

Her stomach clenched, body tightening with each confident stroke as he caught on and went faster, his breath hot in her ear as he groaned, clearly enjoying it too. The fire was building hotter by the second, her legs starting to shake, and she threw her head back as he sped up, her hand suddenly gripping his wrist and moving him even faster. His other hand slid up her stomach and squeezed one of her breasts and her breath caught in her throat as her thighs squeezed together and she whimpered, biting back a cry, body clenching as the delicious ripple of intense pleasure coursed through her entire being. Her hips lifted just a bit and then she collapsed back onto him, breathing heavily as her legs shook and her body twitched.

It took her a second to catch her breath as the sensation faded away, but when she did she almost turned over and lunged at him. God, when was the last time she'd had an orgasm? She'd forgotten how great the dopamine rush was. Didn't hurt that she actually liked the guy too.

“Fuck,” she breathed, blinking the static from her vision. “Holy fucking shit.”

After a second she decided she was too tired to roll over, but she reached up behind her, resting her hand against Mike's cheek, still panting. He tentatively pulled his hand out of her shorts, unable to see her face to get the validation he needed.

“So... was that... good?” he asked, clearly curious. “I couldn't really tell from back here but I think it went pretty okay.”

“Uh, yeah?” She almost laughed, still trying to catch her breathe as warm tingles settled into her body. “I just came so it was definitely more than good, Mike.”

“You *did*?!”

He couldn't hide the surprise in his voice and she smiled, laughing softly at his apparent innocence. She thought it had been obvious but apparently not.

“Yeah, girls do that too,” she teased. “In fact, we really like doing it.”

“No, I know that I just... expected it to be different, I don't know...”

“Different how?” she asked, curious as to what she had or hadn't done that had failed him.

“Um... louder?” he winced at his stupid assumption.

“Well,” she snorted another laugh, picturing the dramatic moaning porn stars she knew she was being compared to. “Sorry to disappoint but I'm not much of a screamer.”

It was then that she realized something was poking her in the back and she shifted, turning her head to give him a curious look. Her lower back was laying over his crotch and she blinked as she realized it was clearly a boner. That made sense, he'd just fingered her for the first time. And she'd come. If he hadn't gotten aroused, then maybe she would have been worried but she mostly just caught off guard, hesitating, trying to decide what to do.

“Oh—”

“Sorry! I... sorry,” he blurted, turning a violent shade of red. “That was just... um, fuck, sorry, El.”

He grabbed a pillow and tried to shove it over his embarrassingly obvious erection, flushing even brighter as she sat up and turned to face him, kneeling between his legs, looking down and then up at his wide eyes. God, what an overreaction. Had he been teased in high school or something? It's not like he wasn't well-endowed. What was the big deal?

“You don't have to be sorry,” she said softly, tilting her head, wondering why he was so embarrassed but trying not to be harsh when he clearly seemed insecure about *something*. It's not like she

hadn't already become familiar with his dick in at least one way. "Did you forget the handjob at that bar?"

"No! No, of course not, that was fucking *great*—" He didn't seem to know what to say. "But I... it's just—" he tried to protest but she shook her head.

"Don't feel bad. Isn't that what's supposed to happen? Like, biologically speaking?"

"Um, yeah—"

He relaxed a bit at the mention of science. What a *nerd*. She barely hid a laugh, instead allowing herself to smile, eyebrows raising suggestively as she scooted closer to him on her knees.

"Do you want me to take care of it?"

He blinked, seeming surprised at her offer. She'd done it for him before, in a drunken haze, and despite her uncertainty about how far she wanted to go with him, she wanted to make him happy. She *liked* making him happy. Was that so surprising?

"I mean... do you *want* to?" His voice was laced with skepticism.

"Would I be offering if I didn't want to?" she shot back.

"Well, no, I guess but—" he paused to worry at his lip for a moment. "I just—I don't want you to think it's something I expect. Or like, um, need you to have to do?"

It hit her, just how inexperienced and unsure he was, and she furrowed her brow, suddenly curious. Was he avoiding it because he didn't actually want to? Had she some accidentally seduced him into something he wasn't comfortable?

"Do you not want to have sex with me?"

She was painfully blunt and she watched as he turned scarlet again, mouth gaping open like he couldn't believe she'd asked him.

"No! I—I mean, yes, I *do* want to have sex with you," he blathered,

floundering awkwardly. "But like I don't—I mean I wouldn't make you —"

"Woah," she held up her hands, eyes wide. "Easy. I'm not asking you to whip it out right now and get busty, but like... you haven't before, have you?"

"Um, no."

He looked down, like he was ashamed and she shook her head, reaching out to touch his hand. By now she had killed the mood and the need to help him had grown limp anyways. The goal hadn't been to shame him, she was just curious what his limits were.

"Hey, I'm sorry I suck at talking about this. But I haven't had sex either so don't sweat it. I just wasn't sure if you're one of those people who's like... saving it or something."

"What?" he squinted, suddenly taken aback. "No, I mean... I don't think so?"

She couldn't help but laugh at his confused expression, his thin brows furrowed, like she'd just asked him to crack a combination safe. Clearly it wasn't something he'd thought about and she supposed she hadn't really either. But it was fair question considering how sexual their relationship had become. She wasn't even sure if she wanted to yet, but she figured it didn't hurt to make sure he was down for it if she was.

"So if something were to happen—" she widened her eyes innocently, trying to play it cool with a casual shrug. "Um, not saying that it's *going* to, but, y'know if it did... you wouldn't be freaked out?"

Suddenly she was the awkward one and he grinned, taking full advantage of the situation.

"Are you trying to proposition me, El?" he teased, way too damn smug. "Should I be worried you're going to pin me down and ravish me in my bed someday when I'm not expecting?"

"Oh my god, stop, you're making me sound like a creep," she rolled her eyes but bit back a smile, glad he felt comfortable again. "I was



just wondering. Don't get ahead of yourself, Wheeler."

He was still grinning and reached forward to pull her to him, kissing her playfully and wrapping his arm around her waist. She fell against him, the pillow in his lap cushioning her fall as her legs flew up and she squeaked a bit in surprise at the sudden unexpected shift. He was so dang affectionate, it caught her off guard most of the time, but she didn't really mind it too much. It was kind of a nice change after being treated so coldly for so long.

She supposed she would be totally averse to touching since Papa never really hugged her, but Max had broken her on that a long time ago, cuddling her during sleepovers and holding her hand. The affection had been good for her.

He leaned forward. "I wouldn't be freaked out though," his whisper made goosebumps rise on her arms and legs. "If something happened, I mean."

She couldn't help it, she kissed him, and then he was pulling her into his lap so she was straddling him, legs on either side of his waist, grinning against her lips. His hands were on her hips, fingers fiddling with her waistband as she tangled her fingers into his hair and pull him closer, her pajama tank riding up. There were scars there too, across her stomach, finer and less puckered than the ones on her legs, and his fingers brushed over them gently. She sighed, feeling the burning from before turn into a dull throb, grinding herself down against him as he groaned.

There was a fire growing, warming the air around them and she reached for his shirt, biting her lip and—

*Bzz bzz bzzzzzz*

She pulled back from him with a gasp, her head snapping to look at her phone, which was vibrating on her desk as Mike continued to kiss down her neck, fingers splayed across her stomach.

"Shit," she swore, hearing the custom vibration and knowing who was calling.

She hated that it was right then but she knew it would be worse if she didn't answer, leaning away from the affectionate boy with a whine and trying to stand up. Mike's arms didn't budge, his lips still pressed to her skin.

"Mike, let me go," she tugged at his hands on her waist, eyes on her phone as fear began to well up with each ring.

"Do you *have* to answer it?" He leaned forward and pressed another kiss to her collarbone, breath hot on her skin. "I thought we were kind of busy..."

*Bzz bzz bzzzzzz*

"I'm serious, let me go," she told him, trying to pull him off. "I have to answer."

"El, come on—"

He grinned playfully, not getting it, and she squirmed desperately away from him, frantic, knowing if she missed the call she would have to explain to the person on the other end why. And that was terrifying enough to make her upset.

"Mike! Stop it!" she shrieked, suddenly too full of fear to do anything but fight, pushing him away roughly. "Get off of me!"

He let her go immediately, dropping his arms as she struggled and then leapt off of him and dove for her phone, smacking the answer button and shoving it to her ear, trying to hide how out of breath she was.

"Hi, Papa."

"Jane." The usual greeting. "I was calling to check to see if you received my email about the annual Bright Students Gala at your university?"

She hadn't checked her email in three days.

"Um, no, sorry Papa. I've been busy with homework, but I can check now if—"

There was a disappointed sigh and she couldn't help but wince. She had let him down again.

"Unnecessary. It's a formal held for the students with the highest cumulative GPAs. They invite... people of importance. With influence. It's a good place to make connections for your future and —" There was a tone of pride, "I will be there as well."

Her heart dropped. He would be coming *here*? College had been her safe space, for the most part, where he couldn't reach her other than the occasional phone call. But now he was going to come and see her and she would have to pretend to perfect and flawless and happy. Try to fit back into the cold mirror where he'd put her perfect image. What if he found out that she had changed her major? What if he found out about *Mike*?

There was no way she couldn't go to that formal and she knew it, feeling every bone in her body turn to ice.

"Oh, wow. That's great, Papa," she enthused, trying to sound sincere. "Um... when is it?"

"May seventeenth, a week before your exams.. After third quarter grades go through. I trust your grades are... sufficient?"

"Yes, I check them twice a week and asked my professors to email me if I drop below a ninety-four percent." She worried at her lip, glad she could at least be truthful about *something*. "So far I haven't heard anything and the tutoring has been helping for A&P so I feel good about it."

"Excellent." He didn't sound happy, but he seemed satisfied. "Make sure to check your emails more frequently. Oh, and you're supposed to bring a date. I would like to advise that you don't bring Max. It doesn't seem like an event she would... enjoy."

El clenched her teeth. He put up with Max after she saved El's life... but he still took any chance he had to put her down and El hated it. Max was her family more than he was.

"I'll... find someone else," she compromised, biting back the scathing

tone but unable to sound entirely sincere. "Maybe my tutor will want to come."

"Fine."

He hung up and her body deflated, the tension draining the second the phone call was over as usual. Talking to him was like having her head squeezed with a vice. With a sigh she set her phone down, rubbing her eyes and suddenly feeling exhausted. Yet another thing to worry about. Finding a dress that was formal enough for a gala, making sure she didn't have a panic attack when she saw him for the first time in months, finding a date that Papa would approve of?

Fucking hell.

Mike had been silent the whole time and with a sigh she turned and headed back to the bed, flopping onto it, sideways, across his legs. God she wanted to forget about the entire thing, at least they had the rest of the night to chill out. She groaned and sighed again and then looked at him.

Immediately anxiety filled her stomach, so intense it almost hurt.

He looked... upset. She couldn't pinpoint what it was but he seemed frustrated, maybe hurt, and definitely annoyed. Her lungs squeezed and she sat up, pulling herself off of him and scooting to the end of the bed, leaning her back against the footboard and pulling her knees to her chest. She'd fucked up, it was obvious, and she didn't deserve to even touch him.

He frowned, noticing the sudden literal distance between them. "Why are you down there?"

"I fucked up," she fretted, her arms wrapped around her legs, unable to meet his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Wait, what?" He scooted down closer to her, the concern in his voice not matching the irritation she'd seen on his face. "El, what are you talking about?"

"You're mad at me."

There was a sigh and she couldn't help but flinch, knowing she was pathetic and stupid. It was her fault.

"I'm not... mad. Not at *you*. I promise," he used his special word and she perked a bit, daring to look up and meet his eyes. "I just..." The frustration was back but she now knew it wasn't aimed at her. "I hate how much power he has over you. After everything he's done to you it's just... it's not fair, El, and I hate it. And it's hard for me to listen to you talk to him and see the way you react when you know he's calling. You don't deserve that kind of stress."

Her shoulders relaxed, even though she still felt miserable. "I hate it too. But there isn't any other way, Mike. I don't make hardly enough money to pay for college and if I don't get my bachelor's, I won't get my master's and I'll never be able to actually help people. At least now I don't have to live alone at the estate and pretend like I'm happy all the time."

Just thinking about going back to the place she grew up made her feel like she couldn't breathe. She couldn't go back.

"Yeah, but... there are other ways to pay for college. You don't *have* to rely on him," he tried to argue.

"You don't know him, Mike." He didn't get it. She was taking enough risks as it was. "He wouldn't let me finish here, he'd pull me out if I even tried and I would have to go back to his estate and I'd be stuck in that big, empty mansion by myself—" her eyes glazed over and her voice was borderline hysterical, the fear blinding her. "I can't go back there, Mike, I can't, I c-can't I just can't I-I'd rather *die*!"

She didn't realize how ominous her words were until she came back from her fear and saw the pained way he was looking at her, like she'd just punched him in the lungs. God, she was stupid. He actually knew she'd tried to die, that wasn't a fair card to play.

"Oh, no, I mean—Not that, Mike, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

There was a second of tense silence where he just stared at her, mouth hanging open, brows furrowed down into a pained line. El felt

her heart drop into her stomach.

And then he was crawling towards her, grabbing her and pulling her into his lap, damn near cradling her in his arms. He seemed panicked, squeezing too tightly, and she bit her lip, knowing it was her fault. They'd ended up shoved into the corner of the bed and the wall, his hand pressing her head to his chest, intimate and close in a way she'd never been held before. Her words had scared him more than she realized. How was she supposed to know he cared that much?

"I won't let that happen, El." His fingers stroked her hair. "I'm going to figure it out."

"Figure out what?" she sniffled, looking up at his face, trying to understand how she could possibly mean so much to him.

"How to get you away from him. So you can be free, like you deserve. I'm going to do it, I promise."

He pressed a kiss to her temple like he was sealing some deal and despite the worry that puckered her brow, the ice inside of her melted even more. He really was so amazing. Even when he didn't know what he was talking about.

"Mike, I... appreciate that, but it's impossible. I don't want you to make a promise you can't keep. I know they're important to you."

"It's not impossible." He sounded sure.

She decided it wasn't worth having an actual argument when what she really wanted was to forget everything that had to do with her. His grip on her had loosened and she gently pushed out of his arms, giving him a reassuring squeeze before crawling towards her pillow and pulling her covers down. It only took a second for her to crawl under the sheets and comforter. God, she was tired.

Mike was still sitting at the foot of her bed and she looked down at him, scooting further towards the wall beneath the covers.

"You getting in or what?" She nodded to the empty space she had made next to her. "I'll share for tonight... if you want."

A grin split his face, that stupidly handsome one that indicated some sort of terrible, dorky joke was soon to follow.

“Are you asking me to *sleep* with you, El?” he chortled, snorting that stupid laugh out of his nose.

She groaned, “God, Mike, don't make me kick you out.”

He laughed softly but crawled in next to her, spooning her tightly. It was kind of the only way for both of them to fit, but she didn't mind at all. He was like a space heater and she felt warm all over, the glow filling her inside and making her smile quietly to herself. His arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her in even closer, her tiny body fitting into his long, lanky form like she was his missing puzzle piece. It was so...

“Cozy,” he mumbled, nuzzling his nose against the back of her head. “I could get used to this.”

“S'nice,” she agreed, yawning, thinking the same thing.

She really was tired, nestling into the softness of her bed and warmth of him behind her and feeling safer than she ever had before in her entire life.

It was too good to be true.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

everything is going so well! wow. mike is so inexperienced ahah. i feel like he'll be okay though. maybe.

i'm seriously going to start trying to respond to comments but i'm so tired all the time now. it's been chilly here and my anxiety and depression are like HI HELLO HOW ARE YOU and i don't want it but it's that time of year ugh.

sorry i talk about myself too much. i'm just so excited to finish this story. i hope you all like it.

<3

-g



## 11. I let the melody shine, let it cleanse my mind

### Notes for the Chapter:

wow sorry this took so long. i have the next two chapters written but they were too... thing were happening too fast and i needed to slow them down. so i finally wrote this chapter as kind of a preamble. pacing is tough man.

i really really love this chapter tho. i think it's beautiful in some ways.

the colder weather has really been making it hard for me again. as i write this i'm medicated cause my anxiety has been so bad i haven't been able to eat. sorry if that's tmi but it's kind of just... real. it's why i've been so unresponsive. half the time i just can't make myself do anything. i'm trying to do better.

i'm not giving up on this fic. not ever. i just want it to be accurate and real and not skip over either mike or el's emotions.

anyways, sorry again for the wait. it might happen again because even though i know what and where this story is going... it just takes a lot of effort to get the words out.

have at it, friends.

It wasn't a date. It really wasn't. They had both agreed it wasn't, that it was just a two friends going to see a movie. Well, like five movies, since it was an all day 80's movie marathon. The local theater had been advertising it for months and Mike had bought four tickets the second they went on sale.

Only problem was, Lucas invited a girl as a date, meaning either Will or Dustin wouldn't be able to go. Dustin opted out since he wanted to take Max but wasn't about to take Mike's ticket, and Will decided he

couldn't anyways since he had a big art project due the next day. Which meant Mike was now left alone with the final ticket.

He hadn't meant to ask her, there hadn't been some secret plan to try and take her on a date. She had made it clear she wasn't comfortable with that and he was fine with it. But then he'd found out—

“What do you mean you've never seen the Goonies?!”

El rolled her eyes, reaching for another glass tube and filling it halfway with liquid.

“Why would I have seen the—What are they called?”

“The Goonies.”

“Yeah, why would I have seen that? There was barely a television in my house growing up... I only saw what Max dragged me to in theaters,” she concentrated as she grabbed the tubes with clamp and set it into the boiling water. “I've seen Mean Girls because that's apparently an important movie. And uh... the first Transformers movie? Oh, and the last two Harry Potter ones, which didn't make a whole lot of sense...”

“You haven't seen the first Harry Potter?!” He sounded personally offended.

“Mike, I hadn't seen Lord of the Rings either. I don't know why you're so surprised, I told you I didn't really have movies and stuff when I was little. Rotted the brain, remember?”

She had to let the solution boil for five minutes so she turned to him where he was sitting on his stool next to her, looking like he'd just watched his dog die. With another eye roll she took off her lab goggles, letting them rest on the top of her head, and then crossed her arms. It's not like it was her fault she didn't know this stuff.

“Stop making that face. You're making me feel... inferior,” she huffed.

He shut his mouth and shook his head in disbelief, trying not to look condescending. Nothing could keep the pity from his eyes.

"I just—I'm so sorry we weren't friends earlier so I could help you. All the amazing shows and movies you've missed?"

"Oh my god don't even start with this again." She was shaking her head but smiling softly at his ridiculous reaction. "Max did her best. She was lucky she managed to get me into a movie theater at all."

"Okay, well, you have to come this Saturday and watch the Goonies on the big screen. They're doing this whole marathon with—"

"Woah, slow down, cowboy," she interrupted, wincing warily, a frown dragging at her mouth. "You're not asking me on a date, are you?"

At that his eyes went wide, his hands going up in defense as he shook his head.

"No, of course not! That'd be breaking like, your big rule, no no, this... this is—" He struggled for a moment and then lit up. "An... educational thing! You could even consider it part of my tutoring services if you want," he grinned nervously, clearly unsure if she would buy it. "It could be fun?"

She gave him a skeptical look, brow raised. "An educational thing? At the movie theater?"

"Uh, yeah. You haven't seen the Goonies, which is an actual travesty, and they're also playing The Thing, Back to the Future, Breakfast Club, *and* Ghostbusters. Which I'm guessing you also haven't seen?"

"Ghost... busters?"

He flinched like she'd just struck him.

"Okay, yeah. You have to go. I require it as a new clause in our agreement of me tutoring you for free. Also... I sort of have an extra ticket anyways, so you don't even have to pay. And I don't want to end up thirdwheeling Lucas and his date." He gave her puppy eyes, pouting out his lower lip, "Please?"

She stared at him, eyes narrowed and mouth twisted, watching him sweat a bit. It was fun to make him nervous and clearly he realized

he might not be able to convince her, but boy did he want to. Her eyebrow raised and he swallowed, shoulders tense, ready to be rejected. He opened his mouth, probably to retract the invitation and she finally broke and let out a laugh.

“Yeah, sure, Mike, I’ll go with you. Sounds fun,” she agreed casually. “I was planning on binging some more Criminal Minds then anyways. Might as well get ‘educated’ if I’m going to be staring at a screen all day.”

A month and a half ago she would have shuddered at the thought of spending time alone with him, but now the idea sounded fun. As long as it wasn’t a date and there were no romantic intentions. She hadn’t left campus since Lucas’s birthday party anyways and she was getting a little bit of cabin fever. Hopefully she wouldn’t regret it.

“Really?!” His ebony eyes were dancing excitedly and a grin lit up his face.

*Woah, easy there, she thought, it’s not that big of a deal.*

As much as she had been appreciating his support and enjoyed cuddling and making out with him the past three and a half weeks since their drunken encounter, she was still wary. Everything about him felt too good to be true. How had nothing gone wrong? He was still sweet and funny, never once pressuring her for more or trying to take it too far. But then there were moments like these, where she felt the anticipation in him, of wanting something more, of imagining something more for them.

And it scared her.

“Um, yeah, calm down. I like movies, I’m sure it’ll be fun,” she repeated with a shrug, turning back to her test tube that was still boiling and checking the timer.

She didn’t have to look to know he was still smiling like a dork, focusing instead on taking out the small tube from the boiling water and then setting it back in the rack of other ones. There was a solution next to it and she reached for the dropper but was interrupted by an arm around her waist, pulling her back away from

her experiment.

“Mike...” she warned. “I’m trying to actually learn here.”

“Sorry.” She could hear the smile in his voice that made his apology seem less than sincere. “I can’t help it. You make me happy.”

He rested his chin on her shoulder cozily, his arm still around her waist. It was a sort of compromise, the affection sweet and comforting despite how... couple-y it appeared. Normally El couldn’t pretend like she didn’t like it, but right now she was a little annoyed, trying to shake off his needy hands.

“That’s nice. Can you let me go so I can finish this?” She pulled away. “If you want to cuddle you’ll have to invite me over some other time. When I’m less stressed out about this fucking *class*.”

“Oh, right, sorry.”

He let her go and then watched over her shoulder as she put in a drop of the solution. The liquid turned blue and they both let out relieved sighs. She’d done it right.

“I think you’ve got it down, El.” He looked at the table which was covered with over a dozen similar looking racks of test tubes of blue liquid. “Do you... want to keep practicing?”

“Nah, I think that last one solidified it, I’m good.”

“Oh thank god.”

She gave him a look, eyebrow raised, “I thought you *liked* tutoring me?”

“I *do*. But you’ve had this figured out for the past hour. I haven’t been able to teach you anything,” he complained, “I feel all useless and lame...”

His pout made her shake her head but she smiled anyways, scooting back and giving him a quick peck on the cheek before grabbing the racks of tubes. It was quitting time anyways.

“Well, you can help me clean this up now,” her eyes were teasing, “so you won’t feel useless.”

“Perfect... cleaning,” he groaned.

He liked to tease her by groaning and complaining sometimes. She was pretty used to it since it was Max’s favorite way to convince her to do something and it didn’t really bother her. Also, he was really cute when he pouted, his eyebrows all scrunched and his lips sticking out. She resisted the urge to kiss him on the mouth, knowing it would start something, squelching the weird butterflies that were swarming her stomach.

“Cleaning is good for the soul.” She washed out the tubes and set them back on the racks as he turned off the water and used a clamp to move the hot glass of water away. “Your room is always clean. You can’t tell me you don’t like cleaning.”

“My room is a disaster.”

“Dustin’s half is. Yours is always clean and smells good. Why do you think I ever allow myself to be in there?”

“How’d you survive the garbage pit last semester?” he asked, curious.

“Oh, you and Will are both clean. I always hung out with him while Max pretended like she wasn’t just there to suck face with her boyfriend.”

He still looked a bit mopey and she rolled her eyes, gathering the rest of the supplies and then nodding towards the bunsen burner.

“Can you grab that?”

“Yeah, sure.”

He followed her into the closet and they set everything back in it’s place carefully. Everything was glass and El was still surprised she hadn’t managed to break something yet. She was pretty graceful, with the exception of her elbows that seemed to have a mind of their own. Nothing was safe. Maybe being around Mike so much and his exceptionally clumsy self had made her more careful. Weird how

everything seemed to go better now that he was around.

After they were done, he turned to head back out the door into the lab, but she caught his hand, smiling sneakily and watching a similar smile light up his face as he turned and reached for her. Their lips met and she let her worries fade away as she lost herself to him again, needing to just stop thinking for a few minutes.

It wouldn't hurt to cheer him up just a little bit, right?

&&&

Sitting in her now usual shotgun position, El glanced over her shoulder at Lucas and his date in the backseat, wondering why she had agreed to come along. It felt so incredibly much like a double date that she couldn't help but feel on edge the second she'd got into the car. Not even Mike's cute grin had made her smile, and instead she messed around with some puzzle game on her phone, avoiding contact as much as possible as the others chatted.

She'd woken up in a bad mood, the sun drowned out by dark grey clouds, winter's chill suffocating spring down and making everything seem cold and dead again. The thought of trying to socialize when she'd rather stay in her room wearing sweat pants and ignoring the world was a fucking drag. But she knew she couldn't back out, not when Mike had been so excited. She didn't want to date him, but she didn't want use him either.

But, god, she didn't want to be there.

"El, have you met Jennifer?"

She muffled a sigh and then twisted in her seat to look back at the pretty blonde girl behind her, offering her usual awkward smile-shrug combo. Of course she didn't fucking know Jennifer.

"Hi, I'm Eleven. You can call me El if you want, though."

"Oh cool. Didn't we," Jennifer squinted, "have a class together last semester?"

"Um..."

“Algebra 100, right?”

El blinked, vaguely remembering a blonde sitting a few rows behind her during that class.

“Yeah, probably... sorry, I’m terrible at remembering faces,” she said, already losing the will to give a fuck. “And names. People, really.”

She turned back around and there was an awkward silence where she could feel all three of them looking at her, making her even more prickly. Lucas quickly asked Mike about some theoretical problem involving Crash Bandicoot and physics that filled the silence and El zoned out a bit, focusing on the song she’d plugged in automatically. She rode around often enough in the little silver Subaru that she didn’t have to ask anymore. Which was kind of nice.

*“You’re a train ride to no importance,*

*You’re in love with hell existence.”*

It was angry and annoyed and echoed the way her fingers clenched into a fist as she stared out the window. Today, despite having looked forward to it all week, was not a good day. She felt irritable and touchy, like everything was trying to piss her off and she didn’t know why.

*“Rainy day genius clouds your mind*

*don’t you realize the blind lead the blind”*

The past few weeks had been so good, there was no reason to feel bad. Papa’s impending visit was the only bad thing she could think of, but even that was far enough away to be pushed to the back of her mind. She’d had Mike to distract her anyways, and he did a pretty great job.

*“You’re anti, you’re antisocial!”*

It was the depression. She hated to admit it because it felt like she was just blaming her problems on it, but that’s just how it was sometimes. No amount of cuddling or warm weather could keep it away for ever and she groaned internally and tried think about happy



things.

Like... kittens. And laying in warm sunbeams with soft blankets. With kittens. And Mike, of course. And kissing Mike, letting Mike kiss her, crawling on top of him, his hands sliding up her sides as his lips found her skin and—

*Quit that*, she scolded herself, *There's more to him than that and you know it.*

But was hard to pretend like their makeouts hadn't opened up something inside of her. She couldn't remember ever wanting someone like she wanted him. And she gave in too often, she knew it, but at the same time... he never complained. Ever.

*"You're anti, you're antisocial!"*

"El?" It was his voice of course. "Hey, we're here."

She'd totally left the planet, blinking and realizing they'd parked in a parking garage across from the theater. It was still early, eight o'clock on a Saturday, and she hadn't had any coffee or food on top of being in a bad mood. She was allowed to be a little spacey.

"Why does it have to be so early?" she mumbled as she unbuckled herself. "My brain hasn't turned on yet."

"How else do you expect to watch five movies in one day?" he grinned, way too chipper for the early hour.

"Ugh," she huffed, not bothering to hide her disgust.

Lucas all but ran off with Jennifer the second they all got out of the car but El didn't notice, too busy being annoyed to care. They were alone and Mike reached for her hand, tangling their fingers as they walked down the sidewalk towards the theater.

She felt a spike of irritation but quickly shoved it away. He was always respectful when they were around people, so why get annoyed when he was holding her hand now, when there was no one to see? They'd made out, this was nothing. This was... nice. Small and simple and oh so easy to give in to.

Which is why it was dangerous

After they picked up their tickets at the front, they were given a schedule of all the movies that were in playing, what times and in what theaters. The first movie was the Breakfast Club and Mike disappeared as she stood, staring into the sea of people, quickly coming back and clutching two cups of coffee and some croissants. They were warm, with cheese and turkey inside and she tore into the food hungrily, slurping her coffee down and feeling a little better.

When she looked over at him, he was smiling, laughter in his eyes.

“What?”

“Were you... hungry?” he teased.

“Obviously. It’s barely daylight!” she complained back, falling into their usual routine of giving each other shit.

“Wow, so early? Shouldn’t you still be in your coffin?”

“Oh my god, vampires are *nocturnal* that doesn’t even make sense!”

There was no sign of Lucas or Jennifer so they found seats for Breakfast Club and settled in, El holding a second cup of coffee and trying to not hate the movie before it had even started. But, surprisingly she loved it, the humor balancing the serious tones and the chemistry between the teenagers absolutely riveting. When it was over and the credits played, she turned to him, looking excited.

“Are they all this good?”

“Yes, absolutely. Well... Ghostbusters is a little cheesy in some places and The Thing is a horror movie. But they’re amazing too, you’re gonna love them.”

He wasn’t wrong. Back to the Future was a little kitschy but fun, and the Goonies made her feel like she wanted to be a kid again and go on adventures and find pirate treasure.

She had her arm looped through his as they left the theater and headed for Ghostbusters, the irritation she’d felt all morning melting

away. It was just another one of those things she had to live through and she felt proud for not biting anyone's head off. Eating had probably helped too.

But the underlying anxiety was still there. Before, she had been mad at herself for having feelings for him, then she was annoyed that he was okay with her being so shitty and noncommittal. Now there was just low grade worry that plagued her all the time.

What if Papa found out? Not allowing them be official meant that people wouldn't talk and they didn't act like an actual couple so it wasn't that obvious, but it was still a worry. Then there was the self-loathing, at treating him so terribly, like a dirty little secret, but still taking full advantage of his feelings of her. The secret cuddling, the makeouts and touching, the way he looked at her as if she was a sky full of stars and he was the new Galileo.

But she still didn't let him in. Not all the way. Not to the depths of her being where only one person had ever dwelled... and that was platonic. What would a life-shaking, heart-aching, all encompassing love to do her?

*It's not love it's just... infatuation. A mutual attraction. We like each other.*

She tensed up and he noticed, looking down.

"You okay?"

No. Like she would admit that right now. Instead, she flashed an attempt at a smile.

"Yeah... just, excited, um—"

"You're lying again, El," he accused with a sigh, heading for the wall and leaning against it so they weren't in the middle of the hoards of people. His gaze burned into her and she purposely avoided it as he nudged her arm. "What's wrong? You've been a little on edge but I assumed it was just the early morning or something."

"I... don't know, Mike," she grimaced, trying to be honest without opening up too much in the middle of the movie theater. "Nothing's

really wrong, it's just... the emotional garbage truck is dumping on me again. Sorry." She bit her lip and looked down. "It's just how I am today... I've been trying to shake it off but it doesn't want to go away."

There was a pause and the familiar fear that he would be annoyed with her filled her stomach. So far he hadn't flinched or really been affected by her mood swings or sudden bursts of emotions... but she was always afraid he might reach a breaking point. It was annoying as fuck to her—there was no way he didn't at least get mildly upset when she changed gears with no warning. Emotional whiplash was real.

Instead of harsh words, his voice was gentle, "Is there anything I can do? Do you need something or...?"

She met his eyes and saw how the inky depths were filled with the concern. His eyes were the night to his starry freckles, the dark brown irises lined with amber, but you could only see it in certain light. Her breath left her lungs and she quickly looked away again, shifting, feeling that dangerous neediness flood her chest.

"No... you're fine, Mike. It's just one of my things I can't change. Don't worry too much, like, I'm having fun. I like these movies. It just... mutes me a little bit," she said with a shrug. "It's worse when I'm uncomfortable but I'm pretty okay right now."

"Is it like, a kind of a thing that's better to ignore until it goes away?"

"Yeah, the more I think about it the harder it gets to ignore it. The movies are good distractions, I can get out of my mind for a bit..." she trailed off.

That was one of the reasons she was around him so much. He did the same thing the movies did, helped to get her out of her head. He was no cure, no magical source of sudden happiness... but he definitely helped. It was strange. Not even Max could do that.

"Is there anything else that helps? Are you hungry? We could get some popcorn or something if you want," he offered but she shook her head.

"No, don't buy me things, Mike. That's too much. I only let you buy me breakfast because I was too tired and hungry to protest," she told him, frowning as she realized the food probably hadn't been cheap, on top of the tickets. Why was he being so unnecessarily generous? "I can pay you back, actually, I think I have a ten somewhere..."

She started to dig into her pockets but his hands found hers and pulled them, making her look up at him.

"Nah, I had to feed you so you would pay attention. Otherwise this whole field trip would be for nothing and the education factor would fail," he grinned cheekily, "and then it *would* be some kind of date and I know you don't want that."

His logic was the stupidest thing she'd heard but she rolled her eyes, appreciating that he wasn't taking it too seriously.

"God, fine. But I'll buy the popcorn, okay?" She frowned, suddenly being forced to remember her two cups of coffee. "Actually, I need to pee."

"I'll get in line and you go to the bathroom. We can meet afterwards," he decided. "Ghostbusters is in theater thirteen, in case we get separated."

She handed him her money and then wandered towards the bathroom. It was pretty crowded and her social anxiety raised its hackles cautiously. But she took a deep breath, reminded herself she had a set goal and someone to return to, and calmed. Sometimes it was manageable and thankfully today was one of those days. It was just the damn irritation that wouldn't go away.

After washing her hands she wandered back out, looking towards the concessions area for Mike, who was easy to spot as he towered above the crowd. His height wasn't usually an issue and it kind of came in handy when trying to find him in the caf or from across campus. His face was relaxed and he looked down at his watch as he waited, face passive. Her heart did that weird little clenching-jumping dance and she looked down at the ground, not wanting to think about how he made her feel.

It would just make her feel all anxious again, her desire to be with him conflicting with the self-loathing and fear, everything jumbling together inside until was a giant mess, confusing her further and—

“Ow!”

She ran into someone, the toe of her boot jamming into their achilles heel. It was some random dude and he turned and met her eyes, face pinched in pain.

“Sorry,” she blurted, feeling stupid for not paying attention. “My bad.”

“Um, don’t worry about it...” His eyes narrowed. “You look familiar, do we have a class together or something?”

This again? She squinted at him, taking in his curly blond hair and sea green eyes, trying to place him. Why was it always blondes?

“Um... Computer Apps?” she guess, since it was one of her biggest classes.

“Yeah! At one?” He brightened.

“Yup. Sorry, I spend most of my time staring at the screen...” She didn’t actually feel sorry. Too many people in her classes seemed obsessed with trying to know as many people as possible. “I don’t even remember who I sit next to.”

“That class is such a joke. Like... we’ve been using Microsoft since we were five, I feel like I know more than the teacher,” he laughed amiably and then offered her his hand. “I’m Josh, by the way.”

“Eleven.” She shook his hand, figuring he was nice enough, eyes scanning behind him, realizing she’d lost sight of Mike in line at the concessions, replying rather distractedly. “You, uh, can call me El if you want.”

He smiled at her, and she let her gaze fall back on him, immediately shuddering. It was the kind of smile she could tell wouldn’t lead to good places and she pulled her hand back quickly, crossing her arms. There were greek letters on his hoodie and she tried not to wrinkle

her nose in disgust. Frat boy. Ugh, she'd fully engaged too.

*Bad decision, idiot*, she chided herself. This is why she didn't talk to people.

"You here alone?" he asked.

She sighed, not bothering to hide her annoyance. "No, I came with a friend."

"That tall guy?"

She blinked, brows furrowing, suddenly uncomfortable.

"Mike? Yeah... um, do you know him?"

She shifted, feeling weirdly uncomfortable at the mention of Mike. Her friend. Who she made out with and cuddled with and let take her to movies. Oh god, there was only one way this conversation she could go. She glanced around, still not catching sight of Mike, or even Lucas or Jennifer. Anyone?

Josh snorted at her question. "Nah, he's just super fucking tall. Like a giraffe or something, I think I've seen you at the student center with him before too..." He looked her up and down. "Are you guys like a thing?"

"Um, no, he's just my friend. He tutors me and is like... a friend of a friend." Her stomach started churning and she didn't know why. "My best friend's boyfriend's roommate, actually. He's super... nice. Smart."

She sealed her speech with an awkward smile, trying not to flinch.

"Oh, well, cool. You ever go to any parties?" He smiled, licking his lips. "Because you totally should, my frat's having a rager next weekend if you want to come. It's 80's themed."

"Uh—" she started to think of a good way to say *hell no*.

"That's why we're all here, trying to figure out what we're gonna dress up as. You really should come, I'd love to hang out, you could be the

Claire to my Bender," he cajoled, suddenly moving close enough she could smell the cheap beer on his breath.

She took a step back, shaking her head. Fuck it, she was done being polite. He was lucky to have lasted this long anyways.

"How about instead, you shove—" She didn't get the chance to finish her sentence.

"What's happening?"

There was a hand on her waist and she looked up into Mike's face as he pulled her close, too close for their friendship status. He had a bucket of popcorn under his other arm and a look of annoyance on his face and she squirmed, shoving him off and frowning up at him, equally annoyed that he would act like they were together when he knew she hated it. He looked surprised and then frowned too, pulling his arm back.

"Oh, uh, I just invited Eleven to a party next weekend," Josh said as he looked between the two of them, clearly sensing the awkward. "You, uh, can come too if you want. It's Lambda Kappa Pi—"

"We're good thanks," Mike forced a smile. "Actually, we have to go or we're going to miss Ghostbusters. Bye...?"

"Josh," the frat boy supplied.

"Bye, Josh," he snorted.

He literally pulled her away, grabbing her wrist and moving away from the clueless blond, towards the theater where Ghostbusters was starting soon. She dug her feet into the ground and ripped her hand out of his grip, scowling fiercely. God, who did he think was, getting all possessive and yanking her around like she was a goddamn dog?!

"What the fuck, Mike?" she hissed, the irritation that had been fading away suddenly back with a vengeance. "What the hell was that?!"

"I..." He looked confused, like he didn't realize he'd done something wrong. "That guy was bothering you, I was trying to help?"



"He wasn't—I, mean, yeah, he was bothering me, but that's not the point." She could feel the ice dripping from her tongue as she glowered up at him. "I had it handled, Mike."

"Like that guy outside of the bar?" he shot back.

Anger rippled through her, hot and fiery and she glared up at him.

"That guy was a drunken asshole who was trying to *assault* me, this was just a stupid frat boy!" she exploded. "I don't need a knight in shiny fucking armor, okay? If you just want to be an asshole and then try to pretend you're doing something nice for me, don't fucking bother!"

She didn't feel bad this time, he'd acted stupid and not even harmless stupid where he was trying to do the right thing, but stupid stupid. There was some cold emotion in his eyes, one she didn't recognize immediately and with a huff she turned, stomping off to... somewhere. Anywhere as long as it was away from him.

She headed out of the building, finding a bench outside and sitting down, just needing to cool off for a second. It was still chilly, but the clouds had cleared out and the sun had lit up the sky, and the sight of it seemed to help calm her as she took a deep breath. God, what had happened in there? It had been a mistake to talk to frat boy, but it's not like didn't accidentally get into it with other idiots. It was something she could handle. And she would have handled it.

And then Mike had come rushing in, acting like she'd committed some crime for having a conversation.

He'd overreacted. Big time. Her anger was more justified, unlike before when he had genuinely been protecting her from a random man on the street who had been trying to grab her. This had just been talking. Frat boy hadn't even touched her. She took a deep breath and rationalized that if he'd simply joined the conversation and told her the movie was starting soon, she wouldn't have minded. But the waist-grabbing, the snapping, the speaking for her thing? Totally out of line.

What on earth had made him act so... possessive?

*He tried to act like he was my boyfriend*, she realized, feeling a rock drop into her stomach.

It wasn't just a rock, it was a boulder with sharp edges, and she winced. Okay, so... he'd done a stupid thing and acted out of line, but was it actually her fault, for treating him one way and then denying this sort of behavior?

He'd said he was okay with them not having a label. Of just being together when they were together and not obsessing when they weren't. He'd told her it was fine multiple times but this—this proved he felt otherwise. If he was going to be unhappy with the parameters she'd set for them, then this needed to end now because if it went on any longer, it would just hurt more.

Her heart suddenly felt like it was being ripped open, a breath shuddering out of her at the thought of losing everything they'd already had, but she knew it was the only choice.

A shadow fell across her face and she shivered, opening her eyes, knowing who it was before she even looked up at his tall form.

"El," he blurted, looking stricken, eyes panicky, "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, well, you should be," she retorted, still too angry to give him any slack. "That was really rude. Like, right in asshole territory."

"I know, I—"

"I've told you, Mike. I can't *be* anything to you. You can't come charging in when I'm talking to a guy and be all... possessive like that. I do know how to handle myself." She crossed her arms, looking up at his panicked face and setting her jaw. "I didn't appreciate you the way you acted."

"I know, I'm sorry," he rushed out, still holding the bucket of popcorn. "That was really—really uncool of me, and I don't have an excuse I just... I saw him talking to you and you were smiling and I just—"

It struck her then. He hadn't just acted like boyfriend, he acted like a *jealous* boyfriend. And god, if there was one thing she hated, it was

possessive, jealous, clingy people. She already had one of those in her life, who controlled pretty much everything. The last thing she wanted was to be with someone who was like her piece of shit adopted father.

“Woah, Wheeler. Are you telling me you’re the jealous type?”

He gulped, looking nervous. “I-I guess?”

She frowned. There was no way that could work. He was nothing like Papa, sure, but that didn't mean he couldn't change into something more sinister. Jealousy was sort of the thing that changed people. Needing to be in control? Of *her*? No, that was a dealbreaker. The biggest one on her goddamn list.

The last thing she wanted to do was end things between them right then and there, but suddenly it seemed like there wasn't any other choice.

“Well that’s not... um,” she paused and tried to think of a good way to say it. “I don’t think that’s going to work, so, um, if you want to stay here and finish the movies I think I might... walk back, I guess...”

He looked confused as to why she was wanting to walk back home which was fair. The east side of campus was a good three miles out of the downtown area, hence why he had driven them at all. But she didn’t have enough money for a taxi and Max didn’t have a car either. Maybe she could call Dustin?

“What?” he asked, looking confused. “What are you talking about?”

“I think I’ll just... go.” She shrugged, feeling oddly numb. “If you’re afraid I’ll talk to other guys or want to... be with other guys, then this isn’t going to really work, Mike. We’re not dating and I don’t really want to have a controlling, jealous asshole busting in thinking that I’m doing something wrong. I’ve lived with one of those my entire life. I don’t want *this* if that’s what it means that’s I’ll have to deal with.” The words fell from her lips like stones. “I guess I’m saying we’re done, Mike. Whatever it was... it’s over, okay?”

She was blunt, deciding holding back wouldn't really help, but as his face crumpled she felt her heart pang. Okay, that had been a little harsh. She didn't actually want to stop talking to him but this was just... too much. He was too much right now and she didn't want to deal with it. She didn't know *how* to deal with it. This was for the best... it's not like they'd gotten overly attached to each other. Maybe they could even still be friends. Regular friends. No more kissing or touching or—

She took a deep breath, steeling herself, hating what she was doing but knowing she had to do it. For both of them.

"Sorry, Mike," she said more gently, standing up, putting some distance between the two of them. "I just... I thought I was pretty straightforward. I like hanging out with you and learning from you and, um, making out with you, but I told you I can't commit to whatever you think we are. And I can't handle people trying to control me. So... it's over."

"No, no, El, wait," he begged, eyes desperate, "I'm—I won't, I mean —" He had to stop and take a breath, starting over, a little more calm. "I know you can't commit to anything. That's not a problem, it's my fault, I was a total dick in there. I'm really sorry."

"Yeah, I know. I appreciate that you can admit it but... it's still not something I can just be okay with," she said with a shrug. "If that's how you're going to act any time I talk to another guy or do something you don't like... I can't do that either."

His bit his lip, like he was frantically thinking and she watched, fascinated, as a flurry of emotions crossed his face. First fear, then panic, then calm, then fear again and finally his face blanked and he closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. A conclusion.

"I'll drive you back, um," he glanced over his shoulder at the theater, "I don't really want to stay if you don't want to—"

"What about Lucas?"

"Oh, I'll come back and get him. They've still got two more movies so that's a good... four hours? He won't even know I left." He jiggled his

leg nervously. "I kind of wanted to show you something. Before we, um, I mean, before you say no. If you haven't totally decided, I mean, I'd like to show you something. Would that be okay?"

She raised an eyebrow, curious as to what he could show her that would make up for his jealous rant. But a big part of her didn't *want* to stop hanging out with him. Or stop kissing him. Or stop seeing his pretty face scrunched up as he laughed that stupid, snorting snicker. She swallowed and then shrugged. One more chance couldn't hurt.

"Sure. Why not."

&&&

The drive back wasn't awkward, but it was tense. She could tell he was nervous, his fingers gripping the steering wheel and his adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed. Apparently the thought of not being able to be friends or whatever scared him and she felt kind of bad... he liked her but, it wasn't *that* big of a deal... right? They could still do tutoring and hang out with their friends. It was just everything else that would really have to stop. No more cuddly sleepovers or makeouts in the lab closet. No flirting or touching.

Was it that big of a loss? Yeah, she didn't want to stop, but they wouldn't totally lose each other. Why was he so freaked out?

It's not like he could possibly love her.

*"I still don't know what I was waiting for*

*And my time was running wild"*

The silence had been too full of doubts so she'd put on some music as usual. It was getting to be a habit after the many times they ended up in his car. It was usually comfortable, but now she was glad for the music, the familiar voice singing the familiar words, her soft voice singing along.

*"A million dead-end streets*

*And every time I thought I'd got it made*

*It seemed the taste was not so sweet”*

His thumbs tapped the steering wheel, beating out the rhythm, his shoulders relaxing. She let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding, moving to sing the harmony.

*“So I turned myself to face me*

*But I've never caught a glimpse*

*Of how the others must see the faker*

*I'm much too fast to take that test”*

The chorus was impending, and his voice almost surprised her as he started to sing too, a rich baritone that complimented her second soprano. Her shoulders casually shimmied to the piano and beat and she felt herself smiling. It was so easy.

*“Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes*

*Turn and face the strange*

*Ch-ch-changes*

*Don't want to be a richer man”*

*“So you like Bowie?”*

“Who the fuck doesn't like Bowie?” She frowned, unable to comprehend such a thing. “Sometimes when it's a shitty day I just put all of his albums on shuffle and it's like his voice is the only thing that gets me through.”

“He almost made me believe I could learn to play guitar,” Mike gave her a sidelong look, smirking.

“It's a shame you didn't, I'm a sucker for a guy who can play guitar,” she teased, forgetting that they were on the cusp of not being that kind of friendly anymore.

They'd just pulled into a parking lot back at the college and he

almost hit the brakes, turning and looking at her, his mouth gaping open. He kind of looked like he was considering turning the car around and driving to the nearest music store to buy a guitar. She burst out laughing and he immediately look embarrassed.

“It was a joke, Mike,” she shook her head. “Please don’t go buy a guitar to try and impress me.”

“I would never—that’s not even—I wasn’t—” he spluttered, at a loss.

She laughed again, unbuckling her seatbelt as he parked and then reaching for the door, saving him from what would probably be an awkward response. It was weird, how fast she went from being annoyed and done with him to this casual teasing. It was honestly easier to be happy with him than upset, the realization surprising her. But it was true.

“Why don’t we forget that and you show me your... thingie?” Her eyes widened at her terrible wording. “Uh, the thingie you said you were going to show me—at the theater?” She felt her face turn pink and she spluttered. “Not *that* thingie.”

Now he was laughing, his amazingly stupid laugh, chuckling at her sudden embarrassment, making her flush harder. She’d blatantly told him she wouldn’t mind having sex with him, why was this tripping her up now?

“Yeah, okay, I’ll show you my thingie if you promise to never call it that again,” he snorted, climbing out of the car. “And no questions until we get there, okay?”

“Um... okay.”

He made a beeline for his dorm. It was a tall building, twelve stories, but he and Dustin were luckily only on the third floor so if the elevator broke it wasn’t too many stairs, in fact she usually took the stairs since it was quicker. But he headed for the elevator, letting her go in first and then hitting the button for the twelfth floor. She frowned and gave him a look but he just raised his eyebrows and smiled suspiciously.

When they got to the top she followed him down the hall, to the very end where the staircase was.

“Where—” she cut herself off as he turned and gave her stare. Right. No questions.

There was another flight that went up and she followed silently, unsure of where he was taking her and feeling slightly unsure. She didn’t think he would hurt her or anything... but this was definitely kind of weird. They arrived at door and he reached for the handle. It was locked.

“Um—”

He jiggled it, pushing lightly with his shoulder and it swung open easily, revealing the blue sky and setting sun in front of them. She could see the whole campus, the bell tower on the other side, the science building and performance hall. Her eyes widened and she walked to the edge, staring out, feeling a smile light up her face as the dying rays of the sun warmed her, turning everything gold.

“Wow,” she breathed.

“You like it?”

His voice came from far behind her and she turned, her smile turning into an expression of confusion as she realized he was still a good thirty feet from the edge where she was standing. He looked nervous, his arms crossed over his chest as he shivered in the chilly, spring air.

“Why are you—” She remembered one of their very first conversations. “Oh, wait, aren’t you afraid of heights?”

“Fucking terrified.” He grinned weakly, giving her a double thumbs up and then stepping back again.

She realized he wasn’t going to come to her and instead crossed the roof back to where he was standing, definitely confused.

“Okay, so this is really cool but...” She looked at him, brow furrowed. “Why did you bring me up here? Why do you come up here if you’re scared?”



"This is, um, me trying to... face my fear? I... like it's a pretty baseless fear, right? There's no reason for me to be afraid of heights especially when I'm the tallest one in the room." He pointed toward the ground behind her, where a line was scuffed into gravelly cement. It was a good seven feet closer to the edge than where they were currently standing. "That's the farthest I've made it so far. Like, as close as I've made it to the edge."

Her eyebrows flew up as she realized what he was telling her. He came up here to literally face his fear and try to overcome it. She felt her mouth drop open. What was with this guy? First with the making promises thing to overcome his dad's lack of commitment, the admittance of being a crybaby growing up but accepting it with his mom's advice... and now this? She'd never met anyone so in tune with their emotions, or so willing to face their shortcomings and try to improve them, something she definitely was not good at.

"So... you want to make it to the edge?"

"Not the very edge, but... somewhere close," he swallowed, clearly uneasy, "I've been working on it since my sophomore year. I stand on the line and try to just take one step forward. Somedays it happens and somedays... it just doesn't."

"How far have you made it?"

"In the year and a half since then?" He looked sheepish. "About seventeen feet. I started at the door."

"That's pretty good," she encouraged him. "I bet you could make it farther..."

She ventured back out to the edge, marveling at the view again, at how high up she felt. It was incredible and she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"I love being up high," she admitted. "I've always wished I could fly. That I could soar up and touch the clouds, up so high that everything on the ground would get smaller and smaller until I couldn't see it anymore," she let her breath out. "I wanted to fly away."

The words just kind of came, something she'd always felt but never really verbalized. She'd flown all across the world, for holidays in Paris while Papa met with her older "siblings", beach vacations in Cancun where she would refuse to go outside and wear a swimsuit because of her scars, trips to Europe and New York, flying over lakes and oceans. She hated traveling with Papa, but she loved flying, feeling at peace with her earbuds in, staring out the window as they soared over the clouds, her chin in her hand.

"Is that why you like birds and bats and stuff?" he asked, still glued to his spot.

"I guess so. I always wanted to be one. Or maybe a pilot, soaring through the sky..."

"I've never been on an airplane," he admitted. "Or... would you believe I've never seen the ocean? The furthest I've been from Indiana was... Minnesota?" He squinted his eyes in thought. "My mom has a brother in Minneapolis we visited once. That was fun."

She turned, slowly walking back to him, watching his face and picking up on the longing in his eyes. That was new, she hadn't known how little of the world he'd seen. Maybe she'd taken it for granted, all the trips and 'vacations'. They may not have been fun or exciting, but at least she'd seen all those places. At least she knew.

"Do you want to travel?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yes," he said, eyes dreamy. "I want to see everything. The Eiffel tower, Machu Picchu, the Great Wall, the Pyramids... all those stupidly touristy places... oh, and ancient Greece? I have to see the Parthenon before I die." He came back from his daydream, blinking. "That's kind of why I'm up here... how can I try to travel around the world when half the places I want to go are high enough to scare the shit out of me? Not to mention actually getting inside a plane and letting it take off without having a panic attack."

"Oh..." She'd been to the Eiffel tower and it was much taller than this. "Yeah, that's a good point."

It was getting colder and she couldn't help but shiver, the sky

deepening to a velvety purple, scattered with glittering stars that were just starting to appear. She was looking up at his face, trying to resist pressing herself against him and soaking up his delicious body heat.

“So... this is amazing but what does it have to do with earlier?” She tilted her head. “The whole jealousy thing?”

“Oh, right,” he cleared his throat, reaching down and grabbing her cold hand, holding it in both of his, face serious as he looked at her. “Um, well, I wanted to show you how I was trying to face my fear and beat it.”

“I’m impressed,” she admitted.

“Cool,” He took a step closer, his hoodie brushing her sweater. “Well, um... I was jealous because I was afraid, right? Which I know isn’t fair since we aren’t... anything.” His face dimmed for a fraction of a second but he quickly moved on. “But it just gets me all nervous, sorry, when you talk to guys because my self-esteem honestly isn’t as great as I would like to pretend it is. It’s not—”

“If you’re afraid I’m going to start making out with other guys—” She shook her head, trying to bite back her irritation, knowing he was being open about his fears and it wouldn’t be fair to belittle them. “Look, I don’t *like* most people, Mike. You are one of the few I can stand. You’re kind of—”

She bit her lip, hoping she wouldn’t regret what she was about to say.

“Look, I’m not committing to anything, but it’s safe to assume you’re... kind of the only one. That I want to do this kind of stuff with, I mean.” She shrugged, wanting to be casual despite the sudden pounding of her heart. “I wasn’t really looking for anyone and it’s kind of a miracle I like you as much as I do, so if you think I’m suddenly going to start making out with some other random guy because of one conversation you’re wrong. I like *you*. And the way you are when you’re not jealous. I genuinely don’t think I’m going to just randomly find someone else I like, especially not someone I like more than you. And if I did, I would be honest about it, okay? I wouldn’t just jump on some other dude at the theater when I’m there

with you. If you want me to trust you... you have to trust me too.”

It was quiet and she stared down at the ground, feeling her cheeks getting hot. There, she'd said it. She hadn't wanted to, it was dangerously close to commitment and was not on board for that at all. But it was the truth... she didn't really want anyone else. She liked how they were and what they did and how he made her feel. A lot.

“Are you—I mean, um, is that—” he licked his lips. “Are you sure? That you won't want to find someone else?”

“I'm one hundred percent sure. I already told you, I'm not looking for anyone, so you can like, chill or whatever, Mike. The jealousy thing is stupid but mostly just unnecessary.” She looked up into his face, taken aback by the sudden emotion pouring out of his eyes, almost forgetting what she was saying. “So you don't have to—”

His hands were cupping her face and then he leaned down and silenced her with his lips, the warmth there spreading down inside of her as he pulled her closer. God, yes, this is what she wanted, to just feel and not have to think about it. It felt so right when they kissed, so easy and simple. Whatever doubts or questions she had disappeared the second their lips met. He made everything melt away, so perfectly.

Did she do the same for him? And idea sprouted in her mind and she decided to act on it.

She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck, standing on her toes and inching back a bit. He followed and she deepened the kiss, taking another tiny step back, never once breaking away from him. His hands were on her waist, pressing her against him as she slowly eased back, one hand tangling into his hair and tugging him down, keeping his lips on hers, nibbling playfully as he groaned and followed her even further, desperate to feel her against him.

She finally pulled back for a breath, gasping before smiling.

“Mike, open your eyes,” she panted.

He did, looking down at her, gaze soft. Then he looked up and his grip on her tightened as he inhaled sharply. They were still nowhere near the edge, but they'd passed his last mark by solid four feet and she grinned up at him, feeling weirdly happy and accomplished. It was obviously something he hadn't been expecting but he seemed less terrified and more amazed. She felt herself smiling again.

He was constantly helping her and taking care of her and now here she'd finally been able to do something for him.

"I guess a good distraction can help, huh?" she teased and he looked back down at her again, eyes unreadable.

"Feel free to come up here and distract me any time then," he said breathlessly. "You're kind of amazing, did you know that?"

"I mean, maybe a little bit."

She didn't want to admit how much his willingness to try and face his fears was a total turn-on. Not a sexual turn-on, but like an emotional one. He'd straight up admitted he was jealous because of his fear of her leaving him for someone else but instead of trying to make her accept it, he'd told her he'd try and work on it. To try and change his way of thinking instead of telling her to get over it. That was rare.

"Hey, um, are we cool again?" He sounded nervous. "I really am sorry for getting jealous. I promise to not be a dick about it again, especially... I mean, I appreciate what you said."

"Yeah, we're cool," she kissed him again to seal her words. "I think I can believe you."

"Cool," he smirked.

They made out a little longer, under the open sky and the glow of the stars, but then she started shivering and he checked his watch.

"Oh, shit, I need to pick up Lucas and... Jennifer? Yeah, he'll be pissed if I forget... I ruined his last date." He grabbed her hand and quickly led her back down the stairs. "If it *was* a date... he didn't put a sock on the door to be fair and he'd promised to lend me his graphing calculator because mine broke and—" He shuddered. "That

was more of him than I ever wanted to see.”

“Oh my god you walked in on him having sex?” she cackled.

“Yeah... he was pretty heated because that kind of ended it and the girl left and yeah...” Mike snorted. “He was the only one of us who didn’t really stay a nerdy virgin after high school. He’s pretty good with girls.”

She stopped dead on the stair, yanking his arm and making him stop and turn too. Her eyes were wide and serious. He immediately looked concerned.

“Mike, I don’t know how to break this to you,” she took a deep breath. “But I don’t think Dustin is a virgin anymore.”

He blinked and then they both burst out laughing.

“Okay, that’s fair,” he agreed. “Considering how often we get locked out of our rooms, I would be kind of mad if he still was... but he really likes Max so I’m happy for him.”

“She likes him too, they’re cute, I guess.” She frowned rather suddenly at herself. “Never tell either of them I said that or I’ll have to kill you.”

He laughed again but swore he wouldn’t. They were going down all twelve flights of stairs, not really hurrying as much as they probably should have been.

“She was his first kiss, you know,” he said suddenly. “And his first girlfriend too, but like... he never really had much luck in high school. The teeth thing kind of haunted him and it wasn’t until we came to college that he kind of... like his self-esteem really grew here.” Mike looked contemplative. “I don’t think he’ll end up back in Hawkins. People there are small-minded.”

“He’s pretty great,” El admitted. “Most of the guys Max has dated have been like... she was a tomboy and I was her only girl friend. So she had a lot of options and wasn’t afraid to explore them. But she kind of always knew they were just whatever. Dustin’s different to her, but I haven’t quite figured out why. He’s just... really good to

her. I'm glad they have it figured it out.”

He was huffing and puffing a bit and she realized she was too. Wow. *I really should exercise more. I'm getting out of breath going down the stairs... that's terrible.*

“If she hurts him I'll be forced to kick her ass,” he sighed, “so basically she would kick my ass and I would lose my honor as well as his. Don't let that happen, okay? It's your sacred duty as her best friend to not let her kick my ass.”

“She'll kick her own ass if she hurts him.”

They'd finally made it to the bottom, though they were both panting and he leaned against one of the couches in the lobby for a second to catch his breath. She joined him and they both rested in silence for a second.

“Oh, hey, Eleven.”

A blond guy walked past and paused to smile at her. She stared for a second but then offered a half smile back and waved, realizing he definitely knew who she was even though his face wasn't ringing a single bell.

“Um, hey,” she offered.

He kept walking and after he'd passed by she turned to Mike, frowning in confusion.

“I have no idea who that was.”

“What?” His eyes filled with disbelief. “You're kidding right?”

“No...?”

He busted out laughing, his usual stupid laugh but even harder than usual, falling back onto the couch and holding his stomach as he gasped for breath. She crossed her arms and frowned down at him, not getting what was so funny. After a few more seconds he sat back up, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes.

“Oh my god, El. I can’t believe it...” He pointed after the guy. “That was Josh.”

“Who?” Her brow furrowed.

“The guy who was talking to you at the theater. You literally met him less than three hours ago... and you don’t remember him at all?” He looked gleefully overjoyed at her incompetence when it came to remembering faces and names.

“Oh. Really?”

A giggle bubbled up her throat. That was pretty ridiculous, the whole thing. She probably should have been able to remember, but she definitely had no memory of Josh’s face... and the fact that Mike had been jealous made it even funnier. He’d been upset for literally nothing.

Suddenly they were both laughing at the absurdity and she shook her head.

“And you were *so* worried,” she cackled. “So worried I’d want to make out with him and go to his stupid party. Clearly I was just so enthralled with him.”

“Oh my god *stop*,” he begged, tears streaming from his eyes. “That’s not fair! I didn’t know!”

They giggled the whole to the car, unable to handle it, and ended up being stupidly late arriving back to the theater as they teased each other the whole there.

Lucas wasn’t pleased.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

mike isn't perfect and i kind of wanted to point that out. his strength is that he is hyper aware of his emotions but he has issues with jealousy and being... coming off too strong? he's not perfect and i don't want him to be idk.



i feel like all of these chapters are that happy montage you see in movies where everything is cute and fun hall&oates is playing in the background and then the actual shit starts to happen heh.

i think they'll make it through.

also i saw It and it was pretty good a solid 7.9/10 and i laughed and almost peed myself yeah it was great.

hopefully i'll be back sooner than later. love you all.

comment please?

-g

## 12. And I know, and I know that you make me better

### Notes for the Chapter:

good lord i'm posting so slowly i'm sorry. i really am trying but i'm taking developmental psych and it's the worst thing help. is there ever going to be a point in my life where i'm not totally exhausted like i don't understand this.

this chapter is so fluffy oh my god. i feel better though. i had it going too fast this chapter and the last one i think i really help to get a picture of who mike and el are. which is important before everything kind of goes crazy.

ummmm i'll try and post again sooner sorry.

El was laying on her stomach on Mike's bottom bunk, eagerly consuming the Hobbit with wide excited eyes. It was *exquisite*, she'd only started it an hour ago while she waited for Mike to finish his TA duties and then shower so she could surprise him and she was almost a third into the book already. The room was empty other than her backpack and her bag of clothes, the only sound the music she'd put on with Dustin's bluetooth speaker, Paul McCartney's relaxing voice filling the air.

*"With a little luck, we can help it out.*

*We can make this whole damn thing work out."*

The dwarves had just been caught by the spiders in Mirkwood and El smirked as Bilbo danced around them, invisible with the Ring, yelling insults and slashing them with his sword. How had she not known this book existed? Papa had only liked entire sets, and she supposed she was lucky to have had the trilogy at all.

Mike had of course lent it to her immediately along with Silmarillion, and while the latter had been harder to get through, the prequel was the perfect thing to occupy her time as she stretched out across

Mike's bed and waited. It was another sleepover since Dustin and Max decided they wanted some alone time. It didn't bother her anymore now that they gave her a warning and she could actually grab what she needed before they locked the door. And it meant she had to hang out with Mike and sleep wrapped up in his arms... which was kind of a plus.

*"With a little love, we can lay it down.*

*Can't you feel the town exploding?"*

He'd been good on his promise to not be so jealous. It was back to normal but better, some sort of trust growing between them with each kiss and whispered secret. Her heart beat faster thinking about it, but lately... she hadn't been squelching it as much. Trying to push away how he made her feel. Whatever it was... it was nice.

*"There is no end to what we can do together.*

*There is no end, there is no end."*

She still couldn't imagine being official. Being his girlfriend. Letting him be her boyfriend. But there was definitely something growing, something she still didn't quite understand. It made her say nice things and do nice things and made her insides warm.

It made her melt.

*"The willow turns his back on inclement weather;*

*And if he can do it, we can do it, just me and you"*

And the depression was gone again. Sort of. It was always there but it wasn't as bad. She was sleeping better (especially when they were squished together in one of their bunks), feeling less annoyed with the people around her (Max had noticed but wisely said nothing), and the anxiety was... at a minimum. Her grades were excellent and she had decided that maybe liking a huge nerd wasn't the worst thing that had ever happened to her.

In fact, he was probably the best thing that could have happened to her, ever. And she was not only grateful, but able to recognize the

good he'd brought into her life. It had taken a solid week of planning and several trips in Dustin's borrowed car to the nearest thrift/discount store, but she'd done it.

*"And a little luck, we can clear it up.*

*We can bring it in for a landing,*

*With a little luck, we can turn it on.*

*There can be no misunderstanding"*

The door opened but she didn't bother looking up, too engrossed in her book, eagerly turning the page. She'd forgotten she was even waiting for him. Mike looked surprised, his towel wrapped around his waist, holding his bag of shower supplies and seeming a bit confused.

"Um... hey, El," he furrowed his brow. "Is it another kicked-out-of-the-room night?"

She didn't even reply, eyes moving across the page, not even hearing his words, her legs up in the air behind her as she rested her chin in her hand. He snorted, setting his bag down and walking over, curious.

"What are you reading?"

"Hobbit," she mumbled, too focused to really form a better sentence.

"Didn't I give that to you this morning?"

"Mm."

He seemed to realize she wasn't going to put it down any time soon and grinned, given a rare opportunity to be annoying without consequences. He shook his wet hair, like a dog, scattering water everywhere and splattering her and the book. She yelped and jumped up, barely managing to shove her bookmark into the pages before she looked up at him with a glare.

"Hey, come one, Bilbo was fighting the spiders," she huffed.

She would have been more mad but her eyes caught on the smooth, bare plane of his chest, a towel wrapped around his narrow waist, skin still damp from the shower. Her brain promptly shut off for a second and she gulped, blinking and tearing her eyes away from his broad shoulders and thick neck, the ends of his wet hair clinging to his face and cheekbones and jawline.

*Goddamn it.*

“Oh, that’s such a good part—” His face lit up and it only made him even hotter.

El huffed, managing to control her sudden horny-ness enough to remember her surprise.

“Yeah, I know,” she rolled her eyes, “but it’s fine I’ll finish it later. Put some clothes on, I have to show you something.”

“What?”

“Clothes. Put some on.” *For the love of god.*

“Uh...”

She rolled her eyes again as he sheepishly looked down at himself and remembered he was more or less naked, his face flaming, backing up to his closet and disappearing behind the door as he changed. He came back, face curious, standing in front of her in his usual striped shirt and jeans combo, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

“What did you want to show me?”

A smile curved her lips and she set the book down again, jumping up and running over to the mini-fridge. It had a freezer and she opened it, grabbing a brown paper bag and then turning around to face him, enjoying how his eyes followed her every move.

“Grab your comforter. And... a flashlight,” she smiled mischievously and then turned and left the room.

She heard a yelp and then he scrambled to follow her, pulling his comforter from his bed and digging for a flashlight. She walked

slowly, so he could catch up, hitting the up button on the elevator and feeling him come up behind her as the door dinged and opened. There were people inside and he let out a sigh, knowing better than to try and ask when there were others around.

They rode upwards in silence, getting to the twelfth floor and then walking down the hallway to the staircase. He kind of figured it out.

“You’re going to show me the roof?”

“No... it just happens to be *on* the roof,” she turned and smile teasingly, “no more questions.”

They ventured up and she did the usual jiggle-the-handle-and-shove combo, the door swinging open to reveal the velvety night sky. It was clear tonight, every star shining brightly, the lights from the campus dimmer now that they were up so high. It was still chilly, the spring sunshine absent and a cool breeze whispering across the rooftop.

“So...?”

Without saying a word she took his hand, turning him and leading him around the side of the small structure that housed the stairs and some other air conditioning ducts and whatnot. On the other side there was a collection of pillows and blankets cozily covering an air mattress, a few mismatching lit candles surrounding the small structure.

He turned to her eyebrows raised. “You did this?”

“Yeah...” She suddenly felt shy and stupid, looking down at the ground. “I-I... I wanted to say thanks, for um...” Her mind blanked on exactly what she wanted to say. She’d never been good at being sentimental.

It wasn’t easy to explain. How are you supposed to say, “thanks for helping lift me out of my depression pit and for being so kind and understanding despite the fact that I’m a huge bitch half the time and honestly don’t deserve you”? She’d settled for trying to spend some time alone with him and showing him the stars. And...

“I, um, got mint chip.” She held up the paper bag and pulled out a

pint of ice cream before going over and sitting casually on the cozy nest. “Do you—” She felt nervous, not even sure what to say or ask, “is this okay?”

Anxiety spiked through her lungs as he blinked silently, totally unsure if she’d just crossed the metaphorical line she’d drawn for him. He was always doing nice things for her and showering her with affection and trying to make himself better. She wanted to do something... nice. For him. But maybe this had been too much.

Then he broke out into a huge smile and she felt relief flood her. He liked it.

“No, El, this is...” He got down next to her on the air mattress, feeling the soft blankets with his hands, looking at the candles and then up at her, face positively glowing. “This is amazing. Did you buy all this?”

She let a half-smile curve her lips. “Thrift store... I wanted to spend my money on something and I thought you might be a good idea. It wasn’t too much, um, so don’t worry about that. I just—I wanted to do something nice. For you.”

She was sitting cross-legged, looking down at where he was flopped down onto his back, staring up at the sky. The stars matched his freckles and she fought the urge to throw herself onto him and kiss each one. Her heart sped up and then his inky eyes caught her, another crooked smile stretching across his face as he sat up.

“Here,” she shoved the ice cream at him, “I brought spoons too.”

“Multiple spoons?” He teased her as he took it. “You think I’m going to share?”

“Hopefully at least a bite,” she teased back.

He opened the pint and scooped out some of the green ice cream, offering her the first bite, but she shook her head.

“You can have it all, Mike, I was just teasing. I bought it for you anyways... it’s your favorite, right?”

"You remembered," he said through a grinning mouth full of ice cream.

"Yeah, um," she squirmed, "I just thought it would be nice. And to come up here... I wanted to show you the stars."

"Shtarz?" He swallowed his ice cream and then looked up at the sky. "I mean, I've seen the stars..."

"Do you know the constellations?" She pointed towards a cluster of stars, tracing the shape of cross. "That one is supposed to be Cygnus, the swan. But it's kind of just a cross."

"Isn't there like some old guy wrestling a snake or something?"

"Ophiuchus," she nodded, "you can only see that one in the summer and fall. Like Orion? When you can see his belt of stars, it means fall is coming."

She pointed out a few more of the constellations that she could spy as he ate his ice cream, occasionally feeding her a bite. It made her insides cold and she grabbed his comforter, tucking it around herself and nestling into the blankets as they talked about Greek mythology and the stories hidden in the stars.

"—not even Medusa's fault, really."

"She banged Poseidon after swearing not to and did it in Athena's temple," El argued back. "She couldn't have done it somewhere else?"

"What, was she just supposed to turn the god of the sea down?"

"She could have." El could tell she was losing.

"She would have ended up as sharkbait," Mike snickered, setting the empty carton down on the ground next to the mattress. "And be real, if a strong, handsome, powerful god came up to you and said, 'Hey, I think we should bang', would you really turn him down?"

"I would turn down *anyone* who said that me, Mike," she laughed. "But maybe you're right. Maybe I need to be a little nicer to Medusa."



His lips were stained green and she stared at him as he threw his head back laughed that laugh she loved so much.

A rock hit the pit of her stomach.

No, no no, she couldn't love anything about him. Love was off the table. Stability and kindness and making out occasionally were reasonable things. Love was... was crazy. And impossible. Her heart just didn't have the capacity for it, Max barely fit in there as it was. And it meant that she wouldn't want to say goodbye, the inevitable heartbreak too painful to even consider.

She couldn't love him.

"So why do you know so much about the stars and stuff?" he asked, breaking her from her spiral of doom.

"Oh... my room at the estate"—she would never refer to it as home—"had a balcony on it and I had a telescope and stuff. Since there was no Netflix to take up my time sometimes I would go out and look. I like the sky. The stars are part of that."

"They are breathtaking," he agreed, his eyes fixed on her as she looked up, noticing his gaze, "like really beautiful. Stunning, even."

God, when he looked at her like that, and said such pretty things about her, she couldn't take it. She turned her head to look at him, eyebrow raised, trying to keep him from noticing her suddenly pounding heartbeat.

"Wow, Wheeler, you going to pull out that guitar you never learned how to play and sing me a song?" she laughed, trying to hide how soft she felt, going with a light jab to put him back in his place.

"I mean, there is that one song..."

He frowned, licking his lips, like he was nervous but then started to sing. It was so unlike him to break out into song that El almost fell over, but then she realized that not only did he have a pretty decent voice, but that she knew what he was singing.

*"Stars shining bright above you,*

*Night breezes seem to whisper I love you,*

*Birds singing in the sycamore tree...*

*Dream a little dream of me."*

She joined him, her voice matching his, and he looked surprised but then pleased.

*"Say nighty-night and kiss me*

*Just hold me tight and tell me you'll miss me"*

They harmonized and El felt something in her soften as he swayed slowly to the invisible beat that surrounded them.

*"While I'm alone and blue as can be*

*Dream a little dream of me..."*

His voice broke and then he coughed.

"Sorry, that was—"

"I liked it," she butted in quickly. "You have a nice singing voice."

He widened his eyes dramatically, clutching his chest and keeling over onto her shoulder, gasping.

"Did you just—was that a *compliment* I heard?"

Her face flushed pink at his tone. "No. No it was... I mean, you could —"

"What happened to Eleven? You're clearly the good twin or some body-snatcher." He was grinning as she pummeled him with her tiny fists. "Quick, say something mean so I know it's you."

The grin slid from her face and she looked down, the anxiety back and stronger than before. He noticed the sudden slouch, the lack of mirth on her expression as she looked away.

"Oh shit. El, I—Sorry, El. That wasn't funny," he apologized as he

reached for her and wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

“I...”

The words were coming, ones she caught in her teeth and bit down on. How she really felt, what she knew he wanted to hear.

*I can't. Not yet.*

“I’m sorry, Mike,” she sniffed as she bit her lip. “I know I’m terrible most of the time. I’m trying—”

“That was mean of me, El, I should have joked about something else.”

“But it is a problem. I’m so... bitchy. It’s just... it’s not *good* and I know that.”

“It’s just who you are, El. You don’t have to apologize for that,” he tried to argue.

“I do though,” she insisted and shrugged his arm away. “It’s one thing to be terrible and not know any better but... I do know. I’m frigid and bitchy and it’s not... it’s not something I should be okay with. If I like someone and want to be their friend, I can’t treat them terribly. Just because I’m messed up doesn’t mean I get to hurt people and I just—I want to be better.” The words slipped from her tongue. “You make me want to be better.”

The air left her lungs and she looked away. That had been too much, too close to the truth that was hiding in her soul. A longing to reach out and be received.

She heard him inhale sharply and then there was gentle hand on her chin, tilting her face up to meet his eyes. They were warm, like his hand, and she felt herself melting into them, a hot spring that welcomed her in.

Their lips met and she sighed as he pulled her to him, setting her in his lap as his hands rested on her waist. The kisses were soft, like tiny notes of gratitude, and he trailed them up her cheekbone to her temple, tucking her face into his neck and snuffling her hair. He seemed to understand that she didn’t want to talk about it and just

wanted feel, reaching up to let his fingers tangle through the ends of her brunette locks.

"I like your hair," he mumbled. "It always smells good. Like peaches. And you always make it look so nice. It's pretty. Why do you always smell like peaches?"

"It's shampoo. It was on sale."

"Don't ever change it," he sighed, snuffling the top of her head. "It's amazing."

She kissed his neck, up to his jawline and across his chin, following the pattern he'd started and running with it.

"You have so many freckles," she breathed. "They're like stars."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Yes. I want to make constellations." She traced her lips over his face, daring to meet his eyes. "I want to know every one."

He stared at her and something else sparked in his eyes. Suddenly she was on her back, his mouth on her neck, his hips between her legs as his hands searched for the zipper on her skirt. Her breath caught in her throat and she felt him find it, felt the fabric slide down her legs as he moved back and pulled it away, but only for a second, his skin soon pressing against hers, his body heavy and welcoming. She couldn't keep from letting out a soft moan as his hands trailed up her body to cup her face, holding her there as his midnight gaze stared into her.

"You're so beautiful, El." His eyes were full of fire. "How do you not see it?"

"I—"

"You should know it, the stars you have in your eyes. Cold and fiery and so beautiful sometimes I can't even fucking breathe when I look at you." His thumb traced the edge of her lip. "I wish I could have you like this all the time."

His words were so terribly romantic she felt herself shudder, giving in to whatever ruled them. She reached for his shirt and then her own, stripping them both down until they were bare, hidden beneath the piles of blankets. Their legs tangled as she gazed him, both facing each other on their sides. It wasn't some sort of inherently sexual thing, but the baring of one's entire soul and body and mind.

She wanted him to see everything.

All the hurt and sadness and anger she had hidden away. The warmth and depth of how she felt about him. The truth of what was in her heart, the truth she constantly tried to ignore. He shared too, and she saw the doubts and fears the festered in the back of his mind, the ones created by her presence. It hurt to know she caused such pain, but the glow of what he felt for her overpowered it and she decided to try and give him more of the good, even in that moment, as much as she could.

They said nothing, wrapped in each other's arms, eyes roaming, chests pressed together. Mike's fingers played with her hair, softly stroking it over her shoulder, and she let her own hands tickle the freckles that spattered his shoulders, enjoying the feeling of him under her hands, pressed against her.

She wanted to make a connection, or at least start one, and she reached for his hand, intertwining their fingers and then pressing it over her heart. He could feel each beat and she hoped he knew what they were for him, each and every one.

His eyes widened, and she was sure he understood. He always did.

"El?" There was a lilt to his voice, one that made her shiver.

"Yeah?"

"Um... I... I-I—"

Her lips caught his and silenced him, swallowing his words, the ones she wouldn't let him speak. But she took them in, let them warm and thaw her out. Her wall of ice was a puddle now and she moved closer to him, trying to take in as much of the heat as possible, wanting to

feel it rush through her, body burning for him and him alone.

She rolled on top of him, looking down at the boy—no, the man beneath her. His midnight stare blinked up at her, glinting in the dark, lips swollen from their kisses and gaping slightly. He had an expression of wonder, like he still couldn't believe she was real and currently on top of him. Wanting him.

It was the disbelief that made her hurt for him, his confidence so shredded that he couldn't even believe someone as messed up as her could want him. She pressed her hips down onto him, feeling him hard between her legs. He was going to believe it whether he wanted to or not.

They ground against each other, both gasping at the friction, and he set his hands on her waist, angling her closer. It was something they had done before but now they were bare and it was more intense, some unnamed emotion sparking between them. They were burning hotter than ever before, El gasping and whimpering with each movement.

Desire burned in his eyes and there was a question on his tongue. He flipped them rather suddenly and she gasped as her back hit the pillows, feeling something fiery flowing out of him as he burned kisses down her front, moving lower and lower until he was lost under the covers.

Part of her was afraid of where they were going but the bigger part didn't care, spreading her thighs further apart as she felt his mouth meet her burning center. Her back arched almost all the way off the mattress and she whimpered as she felt his what was left of his innocence melt against her. His fingers dug into her hips as he worked her with his mouth. Where this skill has come from, she had no idea. He was just as much of a virgin as she was—but as she gasped and twitched and reached down to grab a handful of his hair, she decided she didn't mind.

There was an edge she was toeing, body shivering, but his tongue drew a full moan from her and she felt herself give in and fall over it, let the static into her ears and eyes and shuddered from head to toe. His lips were back on her stomach and then neck and he was back

over her, eyes hooded and full of unbridled lust that made her pant. She could feel him back between her legs, the hard length of him pressing against her again, the slickness there making it easier as he ground against her, searching for his own release. He groaned her name, panting against her throat and his hips skittered forward, too close, pressing *in*.

*Wait, no, her eyes widened, not that. Not yet.*

He'd never tried before and even now she felt like it was more of him following an instinct than making a conscious effort. That's not how he was—pushy or impatient. But he moved forward and she put her hands on his shoulders and shoved him back, kicking at the blanket over them and making the whole air mattress shift as she flailed.

"Mike!" she yelped. "Wait!"

The tone of fear in her voice made him finally open his eyes, confused and then horrified, falling off and landing next to her on his back, grunting. He was up on his elbow, turning to her, looking like he'd just murdered a puppy.

"Oh my god, El, oh my god, I'm sorry, I didn't even—" The words rushed out of him in a panicked flurry.

She held her hand up, feeling breathless from all it, but not wanting him to freak out.

"Mike..."

She sat up too, keeping a blanket wrapped around her, her eyes meeting his terrified ones and softening. An accident for sure then. And no harm done... he'd stopped in time. Her heart was still pounding, and she looked away and bit her lip, almost wishing she hadn't stopped him.

*You can't have sex with him, that'll just make it harder. You know better.*

The hurt pricked at her heart. Instead of focusing on it, she tilted her head back and laughed.

"That was close," she snorted, shaking her head. "Guess we got a little

caught up in the moment, huh?"

The panic left his eyes and they crinkled up in amusement and embarrassment as a similar chuckled welled up in his throat.

"Um, just a little?"

"Or a *lot*," she laughed again.

It was funny, not only the near miss, but the irony of the situation. It paralleled her mind, how she let him close but not all the way in. She couldn't. Not of course, because she didn't want to. Because, god she did. Wanted to let him fill every part of her, breathe him and feel like they were one, a single beating heart.

But he didn't mind, laughing with her and then pulling her down to him and pressing a messy kiss to her forehead and then nose, his hands still warm.

"I'm wondering though..." He was staring up at the sky. "Did you bring me up here just to see the stars or to get me naked?"

"Definitely to see the stars. The naked thing is just a bonus, I guess," she snickered.

"So it didn't once cross your mind while you bought an air mattress to put on the roof that we might end up butt naked?"

She squinted. "What are you trying to get me to admit, Mike?"

"Nothing. Just curious. I thought *I* was the innocent one but here you are, dragging me up to the rooftop and ravishing me under the stars —"

"Did you just say *ravishing*?" she asked, eyes wide as another bout of laughter rippled through her. "What are we, some tacky romance novel?"

"Maybe not a tacky one..." he grinned back, still teasing.

He'd gone limp, the fear killing the mood pretty effectively, but he didn't say anything, not expecting anything from her despite the fact



that she'd gotten off and he hadn't. That wasn't fair and the laughter died in her throat as she looked down, biting her lip. It seemed like she couldn't get it quite right.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?" He turned to look at her, still full of the glowing warmth that filled her like supernova. It only made it hrader.

"I don't deserve you."

His brow furrowed.

"What?"

"You're so... good. How are you like that?"

"Uh—" he looked even more confused.

"I don't get it out, how you aren't totally sick of me yet. You do know you could always find someone who actually acts like they like you, right? Who would let you be her boyfriend?"

"But you do like me. I know that," he shrugged, unbothered, not letting the b-word faze him. "Just because you're the kind of person who doesn't make it obvious doesn't mean I don't know." He gestured to the soft nest of blankets they were on. "And then you surprise me and do something like this. I'm perfectly happy with this, El."

"But you deserve... everything. I can't give you everything." She looked away.

"Hey."

His hand was cupping her cheek, thumb gently stroking her cheekbone as he made her look at him. There was honesty and firm belief in his eyes.

"Just because it's something I deserve doesn't mean it's something I *need*. You give me what you can and that's all I need. I don't expect or want more than that."

“But—”

“Nope. No butts,” he said with a mischievous grin and she startled as she felt him grab her ass. “Only butts. That’s enough for me.”

“Oh my god, why are you *like* this?” she groaned, amusement shining in her eyes as she poked him in the ticklish spot on his side.

It only took five seconds for a tickle fight to break out and soon they were laughing and shrieking again, the serious moment gone but not forgotten. Her heart was shivering as she giggled and fought his tickly hands away, everything soft and easy again.

She marveled at how easily he understood her, how willingly he tried to understand her, and prayed to every invisible force in the universe that it would work out. That somehow this wouldn’t have to end. That she could be happy and accept it. It wasn’t possible... was it?

Papa’s face appeared in her mind, mouth grim and eyes disapproving and she flinched internally. In a way he was just an excuse but he was a very real fear. He would make her go back to the estate if she messed up and he might just consider Mike a mistake. But maybe he wouldn’t? Sure, boys were technically “distractions”, but if she could make Papa see how much Mike helped her... how much better he made her.

She knew she wasn’t cured... but she *felt* better when he was around. Surely that would be a benefit. Papa would be able to see that... right?

There were too many unknowns for her to make a decision, but it was the start of a thought process that could lead somewhere.

“El, what are you thinking?”

“Hm?” She blinked and he realized he was looking at her. “Oh... nothing really.”

“Your face is all scrunched up. Like when you can’t think of the right word or something.”

“It is?”

“Yeah... is that really nothing?”

She grimaced. “It’s nothing I want to talk about right now.”

“Oh. Okay.”

She rolled over again and tucked herself into the front of him, wanting to stop thinking for a bit and just feel. He was the only one who made her *want* to feel. It was miraculous, really.

“Can we just stay here?” she asked.

“I didn’t lock my dorm room...”

“Do you need to?”

“Nah.”

“Nobody ever comes up here either.”

“I know. It’s great.”

He let her snuggle in closer, opening his arms and welcoming her in, kissing her forehead like he did the first time she fell asleep on him watching Lord of the Rings. It had been so sudden he’d almost been surprised, but even then he’d known it was something he would always want. Her soft breath on his neck, her eyelids twitching as she dreamed, face relaxed. Back then he’d known kissing her hair was maybe crossing some boundary, but he hadn’t been able to resist.

He was a total goner.

“Thanks for showing me the stars. And for the ice cream,” he murmured into her hair.

She was starting to drift, eyelids heavy.

“Mmmglad you liked it,” she yawned. “S’posed to be special.”

“Special?”

“‘Cause you make me feel warm and happy.”

“Warm, huh?”

“Like sunshine,” she mumbled, snuggling further into chest. “You’re sunshine.”

His heart sped up and he tucked a strand of her hair behind her ears, running his fingers gently through the silky strands. She really was perfection in his eyes, all pouty lips and big eyes lined with sooty lashes that made him melt. But she was witty and rough, her soft appearance barbed with her sarcastic wit and blunt honesty that drove most people away. That was the point, he supposed, but it only made her more attractive to him. It made these moments more meaningful, knowing she didn’t do these things, that she hadn’t really ever, and that she wanted him to be the one she did them with.

He kept the future he’d planned for them a secret, knowing it was one of those things that would be too much for her to handle. And honestly it was a little much.

But he did want a future with her. He wanted to take her home to meet his parents, to pull her away from the nonexistent family that had almost cost her her life and give her something real. For now he was happy to be whatever to her, but he knew what lived in his heart. What she was to him.

*I love her*, he sighed. *The one thing she doesn’t want to accept.*

Every time the words bubbled up he tried to keep it from happening. And she could tell, stopping him with a kiss or a taunt or anything that kept that reality from appearing in front of her. More than anything he wanted her to be able to accept it and let him love her like he wanted.

He wanted to be her boyfriend. He wanted her to be his. It was that selfish impulse that spurred the jealousy. The thought of her going to someone else for comfort like this made something hot and angry fill him and he pushed it away. Of course he had been telling the truth when he said he was okay not having a label or being anything to her. But deep down he wanted something permanent.

He just wanted *her*. Was that too much to ask?

She shifted in his arms and sighed contentedly, her dream obviously a good one, her breath warm on his chest. His grip tightened a bit and he closed his eyes, pushing away the anxiety of the future and focusing on what they had right now.

For right now, in this moment, she was his and he held onto that, making a silent promise to never give up on her, no matter what happened. If he was going to love her he wanted to give her his all.

She deserved that.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

i want her to love him so bad holy shit. come on el.  
COME ON EL.

i love how some of you have been guessing what's going to happen. it's fun to see. i hope i don't disappoint. but this story is really important to me so yEE.

um i'm still terrible at replying to comments sorry. i promise i read them and appreciate them and absolutely adore them. they motivate me a lot to keep writing because i thrive on validation from others. so yeah if you wanna help me out woohoo.

love you all  
-g

### 13. Why won't you ever know that I'm in love with you?

#### Notes for the Chapter:

i wrote this chapter like three weeks ago but i had to write the last two chapters first cause the fluff needed to build. no angst yet. something big has to happen first.

in this chapter i did the best to describe what depression feels like. it's really hard to put into words and it might confusing and contradiction at times but it's just... it's how it is for me. how it just appears like a fog and sometimes disappears just as easily. it's an odd thing, a fickle thing for me. sometimes it'll be a cycle that lasts me a week and a half and sometimes it'll just be one night. i tried to capture that here. i'm sorry if it's messy and nonsensical.

ummmmm yeah that's all i can really explain. it's a long chapter.

It was April and spring was finally, officially taking over. It was El's favorite season, where things slowly became greener and softer. Waking up to sunshine and birds singing instead of the usual cold, dead silence of winter. The trees were blooming, the campus covered with swathes of pink and white flowers as purple hyacinths and yellow daffodils sprouted through the chilly earth, everything softer and sweeter.

"I don't think I've seen you this happy, Ellie," Max said as they headed for the caf, arm in arm as usual.

Max was a little clingier since they hadn't seen each other ton lately, busy with their different classes and homework and... boys.

"It's just... I love this weather. You know how sunshine helps."

“Is that the only thing?”

“It’s a big thing...” she mumbled, knowing where this was going.

“So you wouldn’t say a certain cute, dark-haired, baby giraffe hasn’t been helping at all?”

El snorted. “A baby giraffe? You can just say his name, Max.”

“Alright, fine. So Mike hasn’t been a factor in how stupidly happy you are all the time? Seriously, I heard you singing that stupid ‘Kiss Me’ song again and *I* felt embarrassed...”

El looked up where a small flock of finches was perched in the trees above them, chirping happily at the warm weather. The birds took off, their fluttering wings matching her heart. She looked away, not wanting to let her friend see her smiling.

“Well... okay, yeah he helps but... I mean, I’m not like suddenly cured or something, Max. I had an anxiety attack last week over the stupid cat dissection.”

“You did? You didn’t tell me,” Max frowned.

“Oh... well, it wasn’t a bad one. I only cried for like... half an hour.”

That was a long time to cry but honestly for El it wasn’t too bad.

“Half an hour? Why didn’t you call me or text me or something?”

Max stopped on the sidewalk and looked at her supposed best friend, who was biting her lip and suddenly feeling guilty.

“I—It wasn’t *that* bad, Max,” El tried assure her. “And, um, Mike found me. He was working and happened to just wander by...” Max immediately looked smug and El groaned. “Don’t look at me like that you know I hate it.”

“So... Mike got you out of it? Your episode?”

“Yeah... he was pretty great. Our cat was pregnant and he’d told me that could happen but what are the fucking odds that I be the one to

get the—”

“You cried over dead kittens?”

“Don’t fucking judge me, I know it was ridiculous,” El huffed. “I’m not proud of that but you know I like cats. I don’t like... seeing them all cut up. I barely managed this whole dissection but I mean, they died in accidents anyways so I figured it wouldn’t be so bad. And my lab partner is nice and does the icky bits but the kittens... they were so *tiny*, Max.”

“What did Mike do?”

El frowned, confused by the question.

“What?”

“What did he do? To make you feel better?” Max clarified, a single auburn eyebrow raised.

“Oh...”

El went back to the moment when she’d been sitting outside the lab on the floor in the hallway, her yellow skirt a puddle around her and tears streaming from her eyes. The irrational kind of tears that didn’t stop, the occasional sob shaking her body.

And then Mike had been there, eyes worried, hands warm on her shoulders.

“El?” He had been on his knees in front of her, hands on her shoulders. “Hey, what happened?”

“K-Kittens,” she’d sniffled. “I had to get the one with kittens.”

He’d pulled her into his lap, sitting cross-legged, and held her tightly, rocking gently and sighing as she started crying again.

“Th-They didn’t even get a *chance*,” she sobbed into his baby-blue button up. “I hate it.”

“I know,” he soothed, tucking her hair behind her ear, lips on her



temple. "It's not fair, but it's life. Stupid shit happens and it suck but... you can't let it keep you from living and being happy and doing what needs to be done. You know that."

"But it's terrible and it hurts," she put her hand over her chest, where her heart was. "Right here, like something is missing. I get so sad that I can't even feel my heart anymore."

She wasn't just talking about the kittens, but the depression in general. How it made every small sadness huge and ripped her heart from between her lungs, shaking her entire being. He seemed to understand, letting out a heavy sigh, knowing he didn't have all the answers but wanting to try anyways.

"That's... part of it, El. Part of how you feel," he had licked his lips nervously. "You have to feel the bad and the sad to know when it's good. And when it's good it's... it's amazing, right?" She nodded and he continued, feeling encouraged. "It's better than feeling nothing, right?"

That was something she understood. Feeling nothing. To live in a grey, foggy cloud that blanketed her world, bleeding the color out everything, taking the taste from food, making her feel like she was nothing at all. It was different from the black hole of depression and while she didn't like either she supposed in a way he was right. And despite the sadness at the discovery in the cat cadaver, she had wiped her nose and nodded.

"Isn't that what your mom told you? When you were little?" she remembered their earlier conversation. "Boy's Don't Cry?"

"Yeah, she had that figured it out for sure and I'm glad she told me," he smiled, rubbing her back gently. "So it's okay to cry right now, El. It's okay to feel that sadness and let it in and let it hurt because then when you're happy you will *know* how much better it is in that moment. It's okay," he assured her, pressing a kiss to her temple. Then his expression became firm and he looked her straight in the eyes. "But you're going to have to get up and go back in there if you don't want to fail the lab."

She hadn't wanted to. She wanted stay there on the floor in the

hallway, sitting in his lap and feeling safe in his arms. It was nice and warm and cozy and so much better than the reality back in the room. The bit of sadness that had overtaken her like a black cloak.

Suddenly she had felt childish and stupid, leaning back and wiping her eyes and the string of snot that had been smeared across her face. Lovely.

“God, you’re right. I’m such a fucking sap,” she berated herself. “I’m crying over dead kittens.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that. And I told you that story, you’re not even the first one.”

“Did you hold that other girl and rock her too? To make her feel better?” she sniffled.

“No... only you.”

His words warmed her up again and she bit back a stupid smile, trying to turn the serious to something laughable.

“Ugh, you’re making me soft, Mike. Crying in a lab... talking about my feelings. Gross,” she had grimaced, voice teasing.

He could tell she was trying to push away the seriousness of the conversation and sighed, loosening his grip on her.

“It’s okay to be a sap. But fine, if you’re feeling good enough to give me shit you’re probably okay to go back in and finish your lab. Come on,” he’d said more gently.

He’d stood and helped her up too, pushing her hair back from where it was stuck to her damp chin, tucking it softly behind her ear again. She looked down, feeling that weird shy feeling again. He was the only one who made her feel that way and at first she had hated it but now she somehow didn’t mind. Usually when someone made her feel uncomfortable, she was rude to them and made them leave her alone. But he was so different and instead of shutting him out she kept letting him further in... and she still didn’t quite understand why. Or she didn’t want to.

“Um, thanks, Mike,” she had told him, looking up and biting her lip.

His eyes softened. Even though he’d been trying to be respectful of not being too affectionate in public, he couldn’t help it, leaning down and brushing his lips against hers. A final gesture of comfort.

She closed her eyes and accepted it, letting her nose brush his as she pulled back, sighing contentedly. Her heart and stomach shivered, that oddly happy feeling taking over again as she stepped back.

*Quit that*, she told herself.

“Okay, I’ll be fine now. Um...” she stepped back and crossed her arms, trying to squelch the sudden burst of happy emotions. “Thanks again. I hope you weren’t doing anything important...”

“Nah, just grading some tests for General Biology. I’m a TA, I spend half my time in Dr. McNeill’s office grading stuff. Technically I’m on the clock,” he grinned, “which means I just got paid to hold you for fifteen minutes. Best job ever.”

She had laughed, shaking her head at him. He was *such* a dork. The warm feeling filled her chest again and she tried to swallow the strangeness of it, unsure of what it was. Instead she turned and headed back to the classroom where she knew her lab partner was waiting. They had been randomly assigned and he was fairly friendly guy named Matt. She hadn’t had any issues with him but she felt bad for abandoning him nonetheless.

“Hey, are we still meeting in the caf for dinner?” Mike’s voice had surprised her and she turned her head to look at him. “Um, yesterday at lunch you said—”

“Of course we are, Mike,” she’d rolled her eyes and given him a genuine smile. “I’m not about to skip out on you after that.”

And so she had gone back in and apologized to her lab partner and her teacher and finished the dissection, wrapping the tiny bodies into tinier bundles and setting the sadness aside to focus on what needed to be done, feeling the warmth he’d shared while he’d held her fill her up inside.

“So you did it? You didn’t have to like lay in bed for a day or anything?”

Max’s question cut through the end of El’s story and she blinked, coming back to the present and staring at her redheaded friend in front of her.

“Yeah, um, I was fine. That’s why I didn’t even mention it... it wasn’t a big deal or anything and I honestly kind of forgot...”

“You forgot. Wow.” Max pouted. “Are you going to ignore me now that you and Mike hang out all the time?”

“*What?!*”

El looked, and felt, offended.

“I would *never* just... I’m not going to just drop you for Mike, Maxie. I couldn’t. You’re my best friend and—”

“Ellie, take it easy,” Max was grinning. “I was just teasing. I kick you out to be with Dustin all the time... it’s okay if you want to spend time with Mike. I think it’s good for you and I like that you have someone other than just me. I’m seriously not mad at all.” Her grin turned suddenly very mischievous. “And it seems you two enjoy your alone time too so—”

“Don’t even start with that miss ‘get a man and get drunk and get busy’. I don’t need that, okay?”

“Alright, alright, don’t bite my head off.” There was a pause. “So are you guys going to like do it or...?”

“*Max.*”

“That’s a fair question! He’s always all up on you and you don’t seem to mind.”

“He’s what?” she squinted.

“Like... all over you? Like he can’t keep his hands to himself,” Max grinned. “Not to mention that hickey you’re trying to hide with that

scarf... that was Mike, right?"

El's hand automatically reached for her neck and she blanched before tugging her scarf up. That had been an accident during another brief make out in the science lab closet... he'd been just a little overzealous but had apologized by sticking his hand up her skirt and she'd kind of forgotten to be mad. But now she was embarrassed, not wanting to admit the obvious to her smug roommate.

"It could have been someone else!" she argued.

"Nah, there's no way. You like him, Ellie. Just admit it and let it happen... he won't wait around forever. Even if he is nice."

"You don't know what you're talking about. We're—I mean—I'm fine with it."

Max stopped walking, freezing on the sidewalk and El was forced to stop too. The redhead's eyes were huge and she reached out, grabbing her friend's hand.

"Ellie..."

"Don't do it," she begged, realizing her mistake.

"You just referred to you and Mike as *we*. I *heard* you!" she fake-sniffled. "I'm going to cry, it's finally happened. You like a guy for real."

"Max..."

"Eleven, seriously," her face sobered. "I haven't seen you this happy in forever and... I think he's good for you. And it's stupidly obvious how much he likes you. He like... looks at you this way."

"Will said that too," El replied dryly. "I haven't seen—"

She cut herself off, remembering that time when they'd almost kissed on his bed after the tickle fight. And then on the rooftop, under the light of the stars, telling her how beautiful she was and how she was all he wanted. *Oh god*, she screamed internally, *they're right and I don't want them be right but they are*. She didn't want to think about

what that look meant. It couldn't happen.

They'd started walking again and El took the momentary silence as a chance to change the subject.

"What about you? I mean, I haven't asked you about Dustin because you two seem to be doing fine but..." she glanced at her friend who was smiling.

"Oh... we're good, um," Max bit her lip, "he said *the* word last week."

"Woah, wait, what?! The L-word? The *love* word?!" El shrieked.

Now she was the one pausing on the sidewalk and Max turned bright red, looking away shyly. It struck El that she didn't know her best friend as well as she used to. They'd spent so much time apart with their respective boys that she'd kind of forgotten to ask and a pang of guilt clenched her stomach.

*I'm a terrible friend.*

But Max was smiling and then nodded.

"Yeah... we were just hanging out and arguing about the Indiana Jones movies—Kingdom of the Crystal Skull is *good*, god damn it," she huffed. Then shook her head. Not the point. "Anyways he just kind of... like paused and looked at me and the just... said it."

"Said what, exactly?"

"I love you, babe" and he had that little grin that shows off his crooked teeth that he hates and he never smiles like that unless he really means something and—"

"And you're just now telling me this?!" El interrupted, feeling a bit hurt.

Her friend looked down, messing with her hoodie strings and looking uncharacteristically unsure.

"I have a reason for that... I just wanted... to figure it out, um, if I want to say it back," she glanced up for a second, face serious. "And

Ellie, I love you, but you're not really great with that kind of advice. You would have told me I was being stupid or something..."

"I wouldn't have said you were *stupid*," El winced. "But... fair enough..." A pause. "What did you decide?"

Max fiddled with the strings so violently she accidentally started fraying one of them.

"I think I do." Her voice was firm. "Love him, I mean," she exhaled. "It just feels like it. He always makes me laugh and takes care of me and doesn't care if I'm a sweaty mess or wearing makeup or anything. And he made me a D&D character, so if I visit over the summer he can teach me to play with his friends." She finally met El's eyes. "I know it's stupidly nerdy but it's super sweet and it means he wants me to come and visit him over break. And maybe meet his family." Her eyes were shining excitedly. "I've never had a guy want to be that serious before. And... he makes me feel all warm inside, you know?"

El opened her mouth, about to say that she did know, but she caught herself. There was no way she could tell Max that. That Mike gave her that same feeling. Because it would mean she was dangerously close to realizing the thing that was impossible. The thing she refused to consider and option. The thing Max and Dustin were only just now admitting five months after they started dating.

*It's impossible, you've only known Mike for four months. That can't happen in four months, it wouldn't be healthy,* she told herself.

"I'm glad he makes you happy, Maxie," she said honestly. "He's my favorite guy you've ever dated, just for the record. If you love him... I'm okay with it."

It's not that they needed each other's blessings or anything, but El giving Max her total approval definitely meant a lot. Max reached out and squeezed her best friend's hand, giving her that happy smile again.

"Thanks, Ellie."

“Just don’t let him figure out I like him. I like that he’s still a little afraid of me.”

They both started laughing and headed into the caf, arm in arm as usual. El made her usual beeline for the waffle bar, feeling a bit surprised to see Mike standing there. He was staring at a new contraption on the counter and she frowned, not knowing what it was either. She came up next to him.

“What’s that?”

He jumped a foot in the air, away from her, nearly missing another girl walking past and clutching his heart dramatically.

“Fucking shit,” he swore loudly, glaring at her with fake annoyance. “Again? Can you not sneak up on me like that?”

“Why do you scare so easily?” she challenged. “Do I need to stomp so the ground shakes and you *feel* me coming? Would that make you happy?”

They glared at each other for a second before breaking out into matching grins and Mike laughed his snorty laugh, both relaxing. That hadn’t changed, where they would challenge each other and make it seem like they were ready to go at each other’s throats. But now they both knew the real reason behind it and the tension always melted almost immediately.

El bit back her smile and turned back to the thing next to the waffle irons.

“So, what is it?”

“It says it’s a batter dispenser with like... different flavors?” he pointed at the directions on the side. “You pick your flavor and it like mixes it with the batter? They have strawberry, blueberry, butter pecan, honey nut, whole grain...”

Her mouth dropped open.

“It’s... amazing,” she blinked back tears. “I can have different flavors? Of *waffle*?”



“Are you crying?” he squinted.

She quickly wiped her eyes. “No. Shut up.”

“Oh my god you’re crying about waffles.”

“Shut *up*, Mike!”

He was grinning at her reaction and she shoved him away, feeling stupid but also seriously excited. Her mind was racing with the different kinds of waffles she could make and she quickly went up to the batter machine, staring at her options.

“What are you making?” he asked.

She didn’t say anything, pressing a button and almost jumping up and down in excitement as the cup filled up with brown-tinted batter. Cinnamon flavored. She disappeared into the caf, coming back with a bowl of powdered sugar, several pats of butter, a carton of milk, and container of cinnamon sugar. Pouring the batter into the iron she swirled the cinnamon sugar into it before closing it and letting it cook. He blinked.

“Are you making... cinnamon roll pancakes?”

“Yeah,” she was mixing the butter, powdered sugar, and milk in a bowl. “The oatmeal bar has cinnamon and sugar *and* powdered sugar. This is going to be the icing once I mix it with the milk and butter.”

“You’re making *icing*?”

“Yeah?” She paused, not noticing his impressed expression. “Oh, did you want a waffle too? I could make you something...”

His face lit up. “Really?”

“Yeah, sure. What do you want? I could make you a cinnamon roll waffle, or maybe like, strawberry banana? Unless you want something savory—”

“Something with eggs? And syrup?” he looked way too excited and she rolled her eyes but smiled.

“I can do that.”

Fifteen minutes later they met up with Max, who was sitting with Lucas in one of the preferred booth seats. El scooted in with Max, holding her icing-drizzled, cinnamon roll waffle while Mike sat next to Lucas, staring down at his waffle creation.

She'd made a new one, just for him, with bacon bits and syrup in the batter, covered with scrambled eggs and doused in even more syrup.

“What are you *eating*? ” Lucas asked.

“El made me a waffle. Hers are like... legendary, like she makes all kind of crazy flavors and stuff,” Mike told him, still way too excited. “It's syrup and bacon and eggs...” he took a bite and sighed at how good it was. “Holy shit.”

“Dude, let me try it!”

Lucas went for the waffle with his fork and Mike blocked him. There was frantic skittering as they fought with their silverware, and then Lucas sat back and frowned.

“C'mon man, don't be selfish,” he complained.

“When am I ever selfish? I let you borrow everything I own. You basically lived in my basement. But this is *my* special waffle and you don't get a bite.” Mike was grinning but his eyes were serious. “I'm not sharing this one, sorry man.”

Lucas rolled his eyes but pulled away, huffing. His friends were so fucking weird sometimes.

“Fine, whatever.” He turned his eyes on El. “Hey, where's my special waffle?”

“Why would I make you a waffle?” she asked. “It's not like you asked.”

“We're friends now, aren't we? You made Mike a waffle.”

“Don't annoy her, Lucas,” Mike snapped suddenly. “She can do what

she wants. She doesn't have to do anything for you if she doesn't want to."

There was a pause where they all glanced at him as he looked stubbornly down at his waffle, that strange burn of *something* in his eyes. El frowned. There was no way it was that damned jealousy again, was it? They were talking about waffles with one of his best friends, not her undying love or something. Maybe he was just in a mood and she shook it off, giving Lucas a noncommittal shrug..

"If you catch me at the waffle station ask me then. But I'm sitting down now, with my food, and my friends, and I'm seriously not getting up unless someone is dying," she smirked. "I don't like you that much, sorry."

She was teasing but the joke fell flat as Mike cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Ha ha. Or if there's a fire, right Ellie?" Max added, trying to diffuse the sudden tension. "Or a tornado? Maybe then you'll get off you lazy ass..." El snorted, good-humoredly. "Natural disasters *or* someone dying," she conceded.

Lucas was giving Mike a confused look but his friend was still staring down at his waffle, munching on the breakfast food in silence, like something had pissed him off. Max glanced around the table, trying to think of something to say since she was usually the one who filled silences. Her or Dustin. They were a good team.

"Um, hey, Mike isn't your birthday coming up?" she blurted. "Dustin mentioned it... April something?"

He finally looked up, swallowing. "Oh... yeah. The twenty-third."

"That's in like... three weeks? We should do something! Right, El?"

El had been eating her waffle quietly, feeling unsure of what was going on with everyone and not wanting to deal with it. But she looked up, blinking in surprise, feeling genuinely shocked.

"Wait, your birthday is in April?" she frowned at Mike.

“Yours is in October. The thirtieth,” he recited. “We’ve talked about it before, um, when you got locked out. But it’s no big deal.”

“Right,” she flushed. “Sorry... I’m terrible with birthdays.”

Max and Lucas started talking about potential birthday parties for Mike while he protested that he really didn’t want to do anything. She listened quietly, not really sure if her opinion mattered and not wanting to interrupt. Some part of her felt weirdly uncomfortable, like she should be helping plan since Mike was her—

Was her *what* ? That had been the stipulation. They weren’t anything to each other—anything that they could explain, at least. If she was his girlfriend she would know what to do and say, but she wasn’t and she made it clear she wouldn’t be. She took another bite and swallowed dryly, wishing that things weren’t so fucking complicated but knowing there wasn’t really any other way.

But she should have remembered his birthday. He knew hers and probably would have had something planned a month ago. Anxiety, the beehive kind, swarmed into her lungs, making her chest vibrate as she realized just how shitty she was at this. At caring about people.

*I’m such shitty person. How do I not know better by now?*

Something under the table brushed her foot and she looked up.

Mike was giving her a questioning look and she forced smile and a shrug. He frowned but said nothing, knowing better than to be obvious while they were with the others. Her waffle was almost gone and she finished it quickly, suddenly wanting to leave, needing to escape from the people around her. Not because she didn’t like them but because she was realizing how much she didn’t deserve them.

She was a piece of shit.

Suddenly it was back. That grey cloud, hanging over her and making it hard to breathe. She felt oddly out of place, despite being with people she liked, and she felt the familiar urge to just run. The urge to feel nothing and everything, like some other emotion could maybe

drown out the inherent sadness that stretched inside her, muffling everything else like fog. Grabbing her bag she stood.

“I have to go to class. I’ll see you later,” she mumbled to no one in particular, gaze vacant as she turned away.

She didn't wait to see any reactions, fleeing without waiting for a response, heading towards the arts hall, where she had her evening College Writing class. Maybe going to a lecture would be a good distraction? But she wanted to be alone, where she couldn't make any more stupid mistakes.

The cloud sucked her in deeper, fogging over her and numbing her to everything. She felt nothing and everything at once: the bad emotions, the sadness and self-loathing that crept up from nowhere and physically weighed her down. It was impossible to explain, something you could only feel, the nagging doubts and uncertain feelings creeping back in like cold frost, freezing out the warmth that allowed her to function.

It hadn't been this bad in years, but now the guilt of her relationship with Mike, of keeping him at arm's length, was pounding down onto her like cold water, as if she was standing underneath a frigid waterfall. And she'd been ignoring Max for a boy she wouldn't commit to. Why was she like this?

It made her feel stupid. And useless, like a burden on anyone around her, even Max. She wanted to vanish. Stop existing and feeling for even a moment just to stop the overwhelming nothingness from taking over. Not die, really, but just disappear. Like a long sleep where you could pretend you were nothing while still technically existing. Her feet were moving but her mind was gone.

These were the spaces of time that were hardest. The doubts crawled in, the ones that whispered how useless she was... how the razor could help bring back feeling, how death would be warm and welcoming, how giving up would be so much easier than this. They weren't as strong as they had once been, but they were there nonetheless, pushing her further into the black vortex of nothingness. She ignored them.

She didn't remember walking back towards her dorm, her feet hard turned her away from her next class automatically, craving solitude, and she stopped. Blinking, she looked around, at the trees that surrounded the sidewalk she was on, covered in sweet-smelling blossoms. There was a bench there and she moved towards it, wanting to sit and try to collect herself, maybe. Rationalize the self-hatred and pain that swirled around her in the fragrant breeze. It was warm and humid, dark clouds covering the sun that was starting to set in the west, and she sat, blinking and staring vacantly, lost in the thoughts.

*You're useless. You mess things up, can't even remember the birthday of the guy you let into your pants. He's so nice, what do you think you're doing? You ruin everything you touch, why are you touching him you're going to hurt him and hurt yourself and ruin everything you stupid piece of shit. Why don't you just fucking die —*

"El?" The familiar voice came from her left. "Hey, what's going on?"

It was Mike, towering over her, brows furrowed into concerned lines. It was later than she'd realized, they hadn't made it to the cafe until after seven, and the pink light of the sun through the clouds lit him up from behind, making him look like some otherworldly creature of light.

*You're going to ruin him. Your darkness will snuff him out.*

"I'm fine," she recited, the usual response when she felt this way. "Just tired."

*"Bullshit."*

His voice was harsh and she looked at him in surprise, not expecting the tone. He was frowning, a crackle of thunder in the distance making her startle a bit and turn, before looking back at him. The sudden storm in his eyes thundered too.

"Um..."

"Don't lie to me, I *hate* that crap," he seethed. "I can tell when you're not okay and when you're just tired and you are definitely not okay."

So don't lie to me, El. Tell me what's going on."

She blinked, astounded at his perceptiveness. Not even Max always figured out when she was lying. Not because she didn't care as much but because El was really good at lying to her when she wanted to by now. Mike was harder to fool.

"Um—"

"Seriously, what's wrong?" His voice softened. "You can tell me."

"I..." she blinked, unsure of what to say. "Nothing's... *wrong*."

"But—"

"I'm serious, Mike. Everything is pretty good honestly. I've felt... great. But this... this the thing that I can't control," she felt empty, blinking up at him, unable to muster any sort of emotion. "I'm what's wrong, I guess."

"Oh... is it the depression? Or the anxiety?"

"Both I guess."

He took that in, trying to understand what she was saying. It was hard for anyone who didn't have depression to understand. It just happened... sometimes something would set it off and it just hit, so hard it felt like a punch in the chest. And she never knew when it would leave either, sometimes Max would make her laugh and it would vanish instantly and other times it hung around for days or weeks or even months. It wasn't always an episode or an attack, sometimes it was a slow building feeling. Like a frog who doesn't jump out of the pot as the water slowly gets hotter because it doesn't know what's happening. Only she did know and she couldn't escape.

Mike blinked, unsure, but he reached for her, pulling her up like he did when found her out in the hallway crying over dead kittens. She went to him, burying her face in his navy hoodie and breathing in his smell of Old Spice spray and fabric softener. It smelled like home and a flicker of warmth appeared through the fog of nothing. He just held her, saying nothing, not knowing what to say, and she exhaled shakily.

It was nice. Simple. Easy. So... right. And his need to help her, his desire to care for her and make her feel better made her shiver inside, made that tiny flicker inside ignite.

There was a flash of lightning and they both startled as thunder fizzled and boomed overhead. A single raindrop hit the ground, a fat splash of water, and El blinked up at the sky, the underside of the clouds turned pink, but the storm dark and black. It looked as odd as she felt, the darkness muted by the colors, a strange contradiction.

But something was about to break.

“Um, El, I think it’s going to rain, did you want to—”

*Crack! BOOM!*

A bolt of lightning struck close and the whole world seemed to tremble as thunder rolled across the sky and shook the buildings, echoing around the bench. El trembled, mouth gaping open as the sky opened above them, the rain pouring down in a sheet. They were drenched in seconds and she gasped at the chilly water that soaked her hoodie and long skirt.

“Oh,” was all she managed to say.

Mike’s hand was warm, wrapping around her wrist and pulling her away and then they were *running* across the campus beneath the deluge, towards the nearest building which happened to be her dormitory. The cold rain was a shock to her system, the whole situation so unexpected that she found herself feeling things again, the warmth from his grip on her wrist trailing up to her chest and thawing her out all the way, a wildfire in her heart.

There were several other unfortunate people running too, and then they were at the steps, bouncing up them and into the lobby of the dorm. They stood there, dripping on the carpet and shivering violently in the air-conditioned area, wet clothes suddenly frigid. Mike turned to look at her, eyes worried.

“You need warm clothes or you’re going to get super sick,” he blurted, blinking rivulets of water out of his lashes, his usual mop of



bouncy hair stuck down to his head.

His worry for her was so unexpected she couldn't help it. She laughed, the warmth he put inside of her bursting out like a small sun and enveloping her. She grabbed his hand headed for the elevator, pushing her hair out of her eyes.

"So do you," she hit the button and the doors opened. "Do you still have that spare change of clothes in my room?"

After being locked out so many times they'd both ended up stashing clothing in each other's rooms, so the badly packed bags were not long necessary when Dustin and Max decided it was alone time. She wasn't sure if he'd had anything left after last time though.

"Yeah, I think it's just pajamas but at least I'll be warm."

"You can stay until Max gets back," she decided as they got in the elevator. "She said she wanted to get some groceries or something after dinner, but I'm guessing it might be a while since it's raining. She's probably still at the caf."

His eyes brightened at her invitation, giving her an assessing look.

"So you're not going to make me walk back to my room in my pajamas in the pouring rain?" He was teasing her again. "How kind."

"Oh come on," she poked him in his ticklish spot. "I would lend you an umbrella."

The elevator was moving up and she turned to face him, tilting her head thoughtfully as she stared back. Her cloud was gone, just like that, and she didn't know what had happened. It usually hung around longer, the intense sadness and self-loathing pressing down on her until she took a Xanax and went to sleep. But somehow... it was gone.

It *had* to be him. He was the only new factor, and while she refused to believe that he could affect her so profoundly, the proof was in the unwanted emotion swelling in her heart.

Her hand went up, snagging his face and pulling him to her lips. He

seemed surprised but didn't hesitate, gathering her into his arms as his hair dripped water onto her cheeks, like teardrops, streaming down her face. She brushed them off her face and then moved back as the elevator dinged, announcing her floor.

She led him out, her hand holding his, pausing only to unlock the door to her room. He was right behind her, his breath in her hair and she shivered despite herself. Blinking, she unlocked the door, turning the handle and opening it, pulling him inside as she shivered more violently, the chilly room making her clothes stick to her like they were ice.

"Are you cold?" he asked, brows furrowed.

She turned and looked up at him and the sun in her chest fired up again, something opening, some sort of damn exploding as the warmth in her eyes met his. She had never looked at him like that before and his mouth gaped open a bit as she pulled him down to kiss her, everything suddenly very certain.

"No," a smile quirked her lips as the door shut behind them. "I feel warm."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

i didn't want it to be too cliffhanger but it's kind of a cliffhanger yeah.

something big is going to happen next chapter once i get it fixed... ugh. so much to do and so little time. some day i might sleep. but not any time soon.

alright one more chapter before the terrible awful angst. i hope you can all handle it. i hope you can see what i'm trying to do eventually. kind of a rising from the ashes of despair kind of feel. you'll see what i mean.

i'm trying to figure out how many chapters this is going to be but i only have the chapter after this one (#14) written so it's hard for me to gauge. i think

we're a little over halfway there but i kind of feel like it's not going to take me as long as i think. it's just so much to write omg. maybe like.... ten more chapters? maybe less, i think i'm overestimating. ugh.

anywhoo lemme know what you thought! i crave the validation and encouragement i won't even lie you guys keep me going.

love you all!

-g

## 14. I can't help but love you even though I try not to

### Notes for the Chapter:

so if you haven't figured it out this chapter contains sex. um... mostly to kind of seal some emotions and stuff, i tried not to go super into detail but idk it's kind of important haha. so if you're not okay with that, you'll want to kind of skim over the middle. the beginning and end are important too. there's your warning.

that's not really a spoiler? i mean mike doesn't know it's going to happen but i think we kind of do haha. that's kind of where it's been headed.

um yeah, so, enjoy the happy while it lasts.

There was rain pounding the window of the chilly dorm room, the storm raging fiercely outside, but El had her arms around Mike's neck, her wet clothes sticking to his as their lips moved over each other. His hand reached for her drenched yellow sweater, pulling it up, wanting to get rid of the cold fabric. She didn't hesitate, letting him take it off of her and then reaching for his hoodie, goosebumps rising on her skin. There was that familiar need in the air and neither denied it, quickly stripping down between kisses.

El stared up at him, blinking the wet hair from her eyes, the heat inside of her burning out of her as his hands scorched trails up and down her body, erasing the chill from her skin. He pulled back and looked down at her, trying to decipher the look in her eyes, the mood softening as she blinked, a soft smile curving her lips.

"El are you—"

"Sometimes I think that I'm dreaming," she interrupted. "Because there's no possible way that you're real."

"Huh?"

She was open, the doors of her heart thrown wide, and she couldn't keep all the stupid thoughts she'd had about him from slipping out. Her hand reached up, tracing his jawline, his face leaning into her touch like it was the thing he'd been craving, her fingers warming.

"The first time I ever saw you at the bookstore, you made that confused face, where you get that line right here," she traced the space between his brows. "And I was so mad at myself for thinking you were pretty."

"You think I'm pretty?" The exact line of confusion appeared between his eyes and she smiled softly, ignoring his disbelief.

"And then you called me El, like it was your responsibility to give me a special name and I liked that. I usually hate that shit."

He didn't say anything, but pulled her a little closer, eyes softening as she talked about him and how he made her feel. It was unexpected, like singing on a rooftop, but he wasn't about to stop her.

"When Max came over and told me you were the one she was trying to set me up with I was so *mad*... because I knew I already kind of liked you and I didn't want to deal with it. I wanted you to go away. Because that's what I do best, shove people away," her arms were around his neck. "But then you laughed that stupid laugh of yours, and it was the best thing I'd ever heard."

"Wait, you like my *laugh*?"

"I love your laugh," she couldn't meet his eyes, feeling embarrassed. "It's dorky and ridiculous like you. It's one of my favorite things."

She'd said the word without thinking and despite the sudden thudding of her heart against her ribs she decided to let it go for once.

"Oh," he gulped,

"That was when I was totally screwed because despite the fact that I had never talked to you before in my life I *liked* you. And then you had to be nice. And understanding. And funny."

"I'm not really—"

"Shut up, Mike," she rolled her eyes. "I'm being nice right now. Don't ruin it."

"I like you even when you're not nice," he grinned. "So I win either way."

She didn't let him gloat, pulling him down to kiss her and feeling his hands trail up her back, unsnapping that tricky hook on her bra. The straps came down her arm and they separated long enough for her to let it fall to the floor, moving back together and pressing their bare chests together.

Mike groaned at the feeling, gathering her into his arms and pressing her close.

"El, I know you don't think you're perfect but... you've got to be close," he breathed. "I..."

It was the preamble to something bigger and she put a finger over his lips. She wasn't ready for it yet, that word that poured from his eyes and whispered across her skin. It could be present and guide them right now, but she still wasn't ready to hear it.

"Kiss me, Mike," she urged.

He didn't need to be told twice, pulling her towards her bed, her skirt falling off her hips and landing in a sodden puddle on the floor, next to his jeans. She was on top of him, looking down, her wet hair dripping cold drops of water onto his bare skin as he held her hips. He was definitely aroused, his hardness pressing up against her as she rubbed back and forth on him, making them both groan.

"El, I—" he tried again but she smothered his words with a kiss, moving her hips faster against him.

"Shhhh," she whispered against his lips. "Just show me, Mike."

"I don't really know what I'm doing," he mumbled back. "I mean every time we do this I feel like I'm going to disappoint you."

“Just do what feels good. You can’t disappoint me,” she guided his hands up farther.

He blinked up at her, like he was considering her words, then let his hands trail up to her breasts again, taking one in each hand and kneading them gently as she sighed. She closed her eyes and let the burning between her legs fill her completely, giving in to what she’d been wanting all along.

Him. All of him.

His hands were on her hips again and he sat up rather suddenly, pushing her down and switching their positions so he was on top, gently parting her thighs and kneeling between them. He leaned on an elbow, using his other hand to hold her cheek as he kissed her and pressed down on her, making her breath catch in her throat.

She was so small in comparison to his lanky form, but it worked most of the time and she wrapped her legs around his waist as he kissed her neck, moving down further. His tongue met her skin, drawing gasps from her as he pressed his mouth against her neck and throat, nibbling the delicate skin there. He pulled back for a second.

“Does that feel good?” he asked, looking nervous.

“I’ll tell you if it doesn’t, okay?” Her eyes were soft. “But don’t stop. Please?”

He gazed down at her, at her silken lines criss-crossed with white lines of scar tissue, all across her belly and thighs and hips. His thumb rubbed across them, feeling the ridges and bumps.

“You’re beautiful, you know. Every part of you. Even these,” his mouth traced the lines gently, “I want you to know that. Your body isn’t a horror movie or whatever...” he exhaled, warm on her skin. “It’s the best thing I’ve ever seen.”

Goosebumps lifted on her skin at the honesty that radiated from his eyes as he looked down at her and she remembered when he’d kissed her scarred wrists, accepting every part of her like he was now.

Something deep in her shivered and she bit her lip, reaching down to

tug the waistband of his boxer briefs. This wasn't the first time they'd been like, pressed against each other, almost bare. He'd pulled her down and stripped her before, though they mostly just cuddled. But now she wanted it to be more, to give him everything she could, to let him in as close as possible.

And she had never been more sure.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?" he looked up from her body, eyes meeting hers.

"I... I want you," she bit her lip. "Like... now."

His eyebrows flew up his forehead.

"Now?"

"Yes."

There was no hesitation on her part but he still seemed unsure.

"Um, are you sure? Like... you won't regret it later?"

"Will you?" she tilted her head.

"No, I mean... I could never regret you, El," his voice was breathy and warm. "You're all I've ever wanted."

He was honest and sure and she felt some damn inside her break open as she looked up at him, emotion flooding out of her. Tears filled her eyes and she looked away.

"Why?" She shook her head, the self-doubt returning. "I'm a mess, Mike. A scarred, broken excuse for a human being. I can hardly function some days, I cry for no reason, I shut down, I bitch at you. I won't even let you be my boyfriend even though..." the tears leaked out, "honestly you're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

His hand cupped her cheek, thumb brushing her lip as he bent down and kissed her, so softly she almost didn't feel it.



"I *know* you're those things."

He pulled back, shaking his head in disbelief, like he didn't understand where her self-doubt was coming from. Did she really think he didn't know?

"I figured all of that out awhile ago. But you're more than that, El," his voice softened. "You're loyal and dependable and a good friend, you're creative and smart and witty. Even Lucas thinks your cool and he's hard to win over. You don't take shit from anyone, especially not me, and when you look up at me with your big eyes and say please I feel like I would set the world on fire to make you happy. I'm just a dorky, small-town nerd who lives in a fantasy world half the time," there was a flicker of self-doubt in his eyes. "The real question is... how did I end up here with you?"

"No, you're wonderful," she whispered. "I—"

*Bz bzz bz bzz*

Her phone went off, interrupting them, and Mike turned to look, easing off of her a bit, figuring she would get up and take the call. But she knew who was calling, the heartbeat vibration making it obvious, and shook her head, pulling him back.

"It's just Max," she wrapped her legs around his waist, a sly grinning twisting her lips. "She's going to have to wait today."

His eyes lit up as she made the choice to remain there in his arms, the certainty clear on her face. He kissed her and the passion reignited, flaming up around them as her phone vibrated on the floor, lost in the sounds they made as they moved together and held each other.

Their underwear was on the floor and he was over her, looking concerned.

"Won't it hurt?" he worried. "I don't want to hurt you..."

"Here," she snagged his hand and guided it down. "Remember what I taught you?"

“Yes,” he breathed.

“Do that again.”

He did, using his fingers to make her gasp and tremble, the burning there turning to a throb that reverberated through her entire being. She squeezed his hand with her thighs as he pressed two fingers into her, breath catching in her throat as she moaned.

“I th-thought you weren’t good at this?” she gasped.

“I asked Lucas for some tips,” he grinned at her reaction. “I hope you don’t mind if he knows.”

She didn’t mind, she didn’t really care about anything, too lost in the waves of pleasure that were drowning her as she gasped. Her hips lifted and she whimpered, craving more and reaching for his wrist, pulling him away.

“Mike, I’m...” she swallowed, “I want you. Please, I *need* you.”

They had tuned out her ringing phone, too focused on each other. He nodded, unable to deny her even if he wanted, and then kissed her so passionately she literally ran out of air. She had to pull back and gasp, trying to catch her breath as he looked down at her.

“I want you too, El,” he kissed her forehead. “All of you.” A kiss on each cheek. “Every.” On her chin. “Single.” Her nose. “Inch.”

He kissed her lips again and pulled her closer, moving his hips down to meet hers. His hand went down, helping to line himself up, and she closed her eyes as she felt him press in, her breath catching as he moved forward slowly. It was a foreign feeling, mostly just pressure, and she let out a long, shaky breath as he hilted, finally daring to open her eyes, unsure of how to feel and wondering if he was okay.

His face was pinched, mouth gaping and panting heavily, his expression one of pure ecstasy as they joined. Her hand reached for him, brushing his moppy hair from his face and tilting his chin down so she could meet his eyes.

“Mike?” she sounded curious, unsure of the question but wanting an

answer.

He finally opened his eyes, his face serene and content, looking down at her. Clearly it was something greater for him and she stroked his cheekbone as she stared up at him.

“El, you...” he shuddered as she wrapped her legs around his hips again. “You’re perfect, just like this.”

“Perfect?” she flinched at the word.

“Not because... I just mean...” He knew that word had only ever been a burden on her but he wanted to change it’s meaning now. “You’re everything. Everything I want. Not perfect because you don’t mess up or you’re flawless but... perfect to *me*. I...”

He took a deep breath and she felt the air around her vibrate in anticipation at the grand reveal, wrapping her arms around his neck and holding him close. For the first time she didn’t try to stop him, the fear gone as they gazed into each other’s eyes, ready to hear the impossible. The damnable. The words she now craved.

“I love you, El.”

He punctuated his words by stuttering his hips and they both groaned at the intense sensation.

“I love you so much,” he whispered, “I want you to let me love you.”

“I... I know, Mike,” she murmured back, eyes soft and accepting. “It’s okay.”

Her answer seemed disappointing but it made his heart swell. She had been pushing him away, telling him to be nothing and feel nothing, but now she was here telling him she *accepted* that he loved her. It was too soon to expect her to say it back but the quiet acceptance of his love for her coupled with their current intimate state gave him hope.

And her eyes were warmer than he’d ever seen, something glowing deep down inside of them.

He understood what she had meant when she'd said she'd wanted him, closing his mouth and kissing her instead, trying to do what she'd told him earlier. *Show me, Mike*. She was showing him what she couldn't say, wanting him to do the same. His hips began a slow rhythm, moving carefully as she whimpered, learning like he had earlier what she liked best.

"Mike," she whimpered. "Mike, I *want* you."

It was as close as she could get to the truth and he sped up, his hand reaching up to tangle with hers, intertwining their fingers tightly as her chest heaved, the movements and caresses making her keen and squirm. She was like some sort of symphony and he was conducting, drawing sounds from her lips that were just for him, his name whispered between the keening whimpers.

He felt constrained in his position, his head so much higher than hers that it made it hard to kiss her and he slowed before pulling out of her completely, wanting to try something else but not really sure how to ask. She sat up immediately, eyes wide and worried, as he sat back, still between her legs.

"What..." she looked disappointed. "Are you changing your mind? I mean... you can if you want but I—"

"Fuck no! I just... want you on top." He seemed unsure, afraid his request was weird. "Is that... okay?"

"Oh... that's fine," amusement crinkled her eyes. "You didn't have to ask."

"I didn't want to be rude," he grinned that crooked smile, "flipping you around and stuff?"

"I don't mind, Mike. I wouldn't be having sex with you right now if I thought you would do something I don't like." Her eyes softened again. "I trust you."

Another soft kiss.

"I know you do," he murmured.

There was shuffling as they traded spots, all awkward limbs and stumbling. She caught her leg on his arm and fell back onto the bed with a grunt, huffing in embarrassment as she got up and tried again. Then he turned too quickly and knocked her head with his elbow, the joint nailing her right in the side of her skull and she winced as his eyes grew wide with horror.

“Oh shit, oh my god, I’m so sorry,” he worried, reaching for her head and pressing apologetic kisses across it, trying to rub the pain away. “I’m a fucking clumsy-ass idiot, I’m so sorry.”

She laughed and rubbed at the spot as she climbed into his lap, shushing him with her lips.

“Shut up, Mike,” she teased. “It’s not as bad as hitting my head on the bunk.”

She straddled him, hovering over his dick and then slowly lowered herself onto him, biting her lip. It was less of a stretch this time and she sighed, her legs shaking, the muscles unused to the position. Her knees gave out as she tried to move down carefully but she *fell* onto him, yelping as he filled her too suddenly and he *groaned*.

“Oh my god!”

They said it at the same time and El’s hands clenched into fists as she panted, trying to adjust to sudden invasion. But the pressure faded into pleasure more quickly this time and she found herself moving, scooting her hips back and forth and gasping as he bucked up to meet her. It took a solid minute for them to coordinate their movements, laughing at how bad they were at it, the whole thing almost awkward, but he caught on, rubbing his hand up and down her back sweetly as she rocked on top of him.

“You’re so beautiful,” he groaned, as she leaned down and kissed him again. “I love you, El.”

She moved faster and he reached for her hands, keeping his arms upright, elbows on the bed, as they intertwined their fingers, his grip supporting her as she chased that feeling that was just out of reach. She wouldn’t say it, but she wanted to show it, the thing he kept

whispering.

“Mike,” she whimpered. “More.”

He juttet upward, meeting her hips with his and making them both cry out as a flash of ecstasy bolted through them. She gripped his hands tightly, feeling safe, feeling happy, feeling... *loved* . It was new and different but she reveled in it, this kind of love so much different the platonic acceptance she got from her best friend. This was so much more.

*He loves me.* The heat was spreading lower and she closed her eyes as something deep inside broke open. *He loves me.* It was the impossible suddenly possible and she threw her head back and let it flood in. *He loves me.*

They moved together, speeding up and then she felt herself falling, leaping from some great height and letting herself fall. She gasped as she fluttered around him, eyes clamping shut tightly as light exploded in her vision, static filling her ears more intensely than ever before. Her legs shook and she fell onto him as she cried out, calling his name, her voice full of desperate need.

“Mike!”

She tightened and took all of him in and he couldn't hold it any longer, squeezing her hands as he leapt too, a grunt leaving his throat as she fell on him, her face landing in the crook of her neck cozily.

It was quiet as they panted, both breathless and utterly spent, and he let her hands go so he could wrap his arms around her, pulling her up his body to meet his lips. She sighed against him as they kissed and then curled up on him sideways, feeling his warm body against hers. She felt him tense and turned to look at him, brow furrowed, noticing a look of fear.

“Wait, shit, we didn't use a condom,” he blurted.

“Oh, I've been on birth control since I was sixteen to help with my, um, lady stuff. So we're good...” Her brow furrowed. “Unless you think have you have an STD or something?”

He snorted.

“Yeah, I have tons from being a virgin all my life.”

“Oh my god,” she giggled, his joke suddenly the funniest thing she’d ever heard thanks to the rush of endorphins.

He relaxed considerably and snickered too, feeling better.

“Well, um, cool. Sorry though.”

“For what?” she blinked up at him, confused as to what he could possibly be apologizing for after that. It had been kind of awkward and not perfect in the slightest. So basically everything she could have ever wanted.

He grimaced. “I probably should have pulled out... that’s gross or whatever, right?”

“Is it? I don't mind if you don't...”

She slid off of him to the side, so she was actually on the bed, and tucked herself into his chest as he turned too, sighing contently. This was a much more familiar position and she fit into him like always, their cuddling form damn near perfect. His lips brushed her forehead and then he pulled back again so he could meet her eyes.

“I meant it though, um, just so you know. I wasn't just saying it because we were having sex,” he spouted suddenly and she felt confused again, wondering what he was talking about.

“Meant what?”

She looked up at him and saw that shadow of fear in his eyes. The same one she'd seen after he'd almost kissed her during the movie marathon, the one that had darkened his eyes when she pulled away in the hallways, the one on the rooftop when he'd almost gone too far too fast. The fear that he would be too much and she would refuse him. She felt something in her heart pang and she realized she wanted to take that fear away.

“When I said... I loved you,” he explained quickly. “I mean it—um, I

still mean it. I know you don't think you deserve it or that you're worth it but..." he pulled her closer, almost crushing her, "I love you so much sometimes I feel crazy. I just want to be around you all the time and touch you and hold you and let you know how amazing you are even though you don't want to believe that it's possible." She inhaled sharply and he winced. "I'm sorry if that's too much but I can't pretend like it's not what I'm feeling every time I look at you."

"Oh," she peeped, not expecting the speech.

Nobody made her feel like he did, and for the second time that night she didn't back away. He was offering her everything and she didn't want to refuse him, even if she wasn't ready to face her own feelings quite yet. She'd tried to tell him with her body what she couldn't say with her mouth, but now she feared he hadn't quite understood the full extent of what she'd just done.

"Okay," she nodded. "I... I can accept that. I want you too, Mike. You make me feel warm, like sunshine, and even though..." she bit her lip, "even though I'm never going to stop feeling sad and depressed and anxious... you make it easier. You make me better. I didn't know that was possible."

She reached up and cupped his face in her hands, watching the expression of wonder fill his face at her words.

"You're fine with me loving you? You weren't just saying that earlier?" He almost gasped. "I can... I can tell you that I love you? And you won't be mad or afraid?"

"Yes," she nodded firmly. "I'm okay with it."

"And..." his eyes filled with sudden, wild, desperate hope. "You might even love me back some day?"

She exhaled shakily, knowing she was sealing their fate.

"Yes, Mike," she swallowed, nervous to admit it. "I think... parts of me already do."

He took in a sudden breath and then he was covering her face in kisses, making her giggle as his lips tickled her skin. She pushed him



away playfully and he grinned as he pulled her closer, tickling her slightly and making her laugh louder. There was a brief, playful struggle and she almost fell off the bed, his grip barely catching her before she hit the floor and then wrapping her up and snuggling her into him. It was bliss, a euphoria that surrounded both of them as they clung to each other.

Her phone buzzed again, a text message, but she didn't notice, too wrapped up in the happiness of the moment. She shivered suddenly and he noticed, rubbing her arms and shoulders.

"Am I allowed to sleep here?" he grinned impishly. "I feel like I've earned it."

"Yeah, of course. I'm betting Max is staying in your room anyways. Otherwise she would be back by now."

"Maybe she heard us and decided not to come in," he snickered.

"I told you, I'm not a screamer."

"You screamed my name," he grinned. "So maybe you're louder than you thought."

"I didn't *scream* it—"

He cut her off with another kiss and she decided this was one battle she wouldn't mind losing. Instead she rolled over and sat up on the edge of the bed, looking over her shoulder at him and smiling softly as he watched her, his arm still wrapped firmly around her waist.

"I think I want some pajamas though, did you want yours too?"

"Yeah, that sounds good," he sat up on an elbow. "Even though I kind of like cuddling you naked."

"You would like doing anything if I'm naked."

"True," he smirked.

She stood and walked across the room, shivering in the chilly air. Rain was still pouring against the windows and occasionally lightning

would flash, the storm far from over. She opened her closet, reaching for her warm, flannel pajamas on the top shelf. His footsteps sounded behind her and then she felt him against her, his hands on her waist as he tucked her into the front of him, his nose snuffling against the top of her head as he held her close from behind. He was still warm and she leaned back, their naked skin rasping as she snuggled into him, letting the warmth invade her again.

"You still smell like peaches," he mumbled. "I don't know why but I fucking love peaches."

She laughed.

"I lied before. I have peach shampoo *and* body scrub. The whole set was on sale and I couldn't resist."

"Well don't ever change it. You smell so good I could just—" he nibbled her earlobe and she sighed, leaning back and setting her hands over his.

"I can't promise I won't change my shampoo, Mike," she rolled her eyes, figuring the request was kind of ridiculous.

He nuzzled his face into her temple, hands gripping her hips tightly as she pressed back against him. He inhaled again, a sniffle, and she shivered, sensing something.

"Promise you won't leave me, El." There was a drop of something wet on her neck and she turned, meeting his eyes that were wet and full of fear and tears. "I love you so much. Please don't leave me."

There was a breath and she turned, hands reaching up and bringing him down, so their foreheads were pressed together.

"I won't leave you, Mike. I don't want to," she bit her lip. "But you know I can't promise that. I can't promise he won't take me away if I mess up."

"I can though. I promise to always be there when you need me," he breathed.

"Mike—" she tried to protest.

"I promise I'm going to love you even when you don't want me to. No matter what happens."

"Mike that's too—"

"I love you, El. You're all I want."

She gave up her weak protests as their eyes met and she saw the love he was promising here in them. Her heart felt like it would explode and she closed her eyes and bit her lip, swallowing the words that crashed against her lips. She couldn't say it. She wasn't ready. And he could tell.

"I'll wait," he promised. "I'll wait as long as you need until you decide you can love me too."

"I want to," she whispered. "But... I..."

"That's enough for me, El. What you can give me is enough. It's hope."

She kissed him again, her pajamas forgotten, and she felt him twitch against her belly, felt his desire for her reawaken. So she led him back to her bed, deciding to show him once again the thing she wasn't ready to say yet, each kiss and touch full of love as they once again moved together, his name on her tongue.

Afterwards she lay against him, her back pressed to his stomach as he held her, both sweaty and panting. She reached for a blanket and he tried to help and this time she did fall off the bed as he shifted, hitting the ground with a *thud* and wincing.

"Oh, shit, El, are you okay?" He was stricken, like he'd just punched her in the face.

"Ow." She sat up on her knees. "How about we actually get *into* the bed?"

"Sounds good," he grinned. "I kind of want to cuddle the shit out of you anyways."

"I think I'm okay with that."

They snuggled together like they had before, only she was on the inside next to the wall so she wouldn't fall out again. She'd tugged on her pajamas and he had too, everything feeling impossibly comfortable and cozy. Instead of spooning she faced him, his breath warm on her forehead as he looked down at her.

"Hey," he said rather suddenly. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Um... for letting me love you?" he was uncertain but she softened.

"Thanks for wanting me," she shrugged. "It makes it easier."

"I'll always want you," he promised.

He wrapped her up in his arms, one hand splayed across her lower back, pressing her close to him.

"I'm going figure it out, so you don't have to be afraid anymore. Of your dad, I mean," he looked suspiciously optimistic and she wondered why he seemed so excited about the idea. "I promised I would try and find a way and I'm going to make it happen."

That impossible notion again. There wasn't any possible way he could set her free but she decided not to protest. Instead she focused on his motivation, wondering why he would chase the impossible just for her.

"So that I'll date you?" she raised an eyebrow.

"No... well, I mean that would be nice," he admitted. "But everyone deserves to be free. You shouldn't have to be afraid of going back to your dad if something goes wrong. Or even be afraid of seeing him..."

She shifted a bit, an idea cropping up in her mind. Something that had been bothering her that she realized had an immediate solution.

"This is stupid, but do you want to go to that formal-gala-banquet thing with me?" she bit her lip, adding the words she knew would make him happy. "As my... date?"

“Are you asking me out?” he grinned cheekily and she smacked his chest.

“No! Well sort of. You're smart and nice and my dad... he might actually like you,” she blurted and then added like an afterthought, “I'd feel better. If he knew and I didn't have to hide you.”

There was a pause as he connected some dots in his mind.

“Are you trying to get his approval? About me?”

A pause. “Maybe. I don't want to have to hide you... anymore. And if he likes you he might let me date you and I won't have to feel guilty all the time and we can—”

“Be together,” he breathed, catching her meaning. “Of course I'll come. Actually, I get an invite every year but I've never gone...”

“Really? Why not?” she tilted her head.

“Not my scene,” he pressed kiss to her forehead. “But for you I'll make an exception.”

“Oh wow, thanks.”

The sarcasm was thick in her voice but she reached up and tugged at his hair, stroking her fingers through the thick, dark locks. He sighed but then bit his lip, like there was something bothering him.

“So... what are we now?”

It was an impossible question but somehow she wasn't afraid. The warmth was all she felt, bubbling out of her as she nestled against him. She couldn't allow herself to love him yet, to fall completely... but she decided she was ready for the first step, biting back a grin.

“What do you want to be?” she asked, knowing the answer.

“Whatever you think, El.”

She bit her lip, surprised he hadn't said boyfriend and girlfriend. It was the thing he'd been fighting, the need to ask her and the jealousy

of not having that secure connection. And he loved her, so strongly she knew she didn't need to be afraid.

"What if I wanted you to be my boyfriend?"

A gasp and then a barely restrained wiggle of excitement.

"Um, well then I'd be your boyfriend..." he seemed almost afraid to ask but did anyways. "Would that mean you'd be my girlfriend? Like officially?"

"Officially dating... is that what the kids call it nowadays? Not going steady?" she teased, not wanting it to get too heavy but wanting him to know she serious.

"I-It could be both. If you want. Whatever you want," he was still hesitant to believe what she was saying.

"Michael E. Wheeler, my official, steady boyfriend... I kind of like how that sounds."

"*Really?!?*"

She looked up and met his eyes and couldn't help smiling at the excitement shining there, the hope that had been only a tiny seed bursting into bloom as she nodded her head.

"Is it okay that I'm asking or do you want me to respect your masculinity and let you ask?"

There were suddenly kisses being peppered across her entire face and she sputtered, giggling at how such a small thing had made him so happy. But she realized it was making her happy too. She'd never had a boyfriend before.

"I don't *care*, El. You're saying you'll be girlfriend? For real?"

"As long as you're my boyfriend," her eyes softened. "You make me happy and I want to make you happy too. I've been such a mess and so terrible and you've still... wanted me. I want that too. I mean... I have wanted you. Despite everything I've said... I haven't been able to stay away from you, Mike. Maybe that means I'm not supposed

to.”

“So at the formal... you’re not just telling your dad we’re friends? It’s like the real deal?”

“It’s the real deal, Mike,” she smiled up at him. “I’m yours.”

“You’re mine,” his voice had a strange edge to it, but he was grinning so widely she didn’t even notice. “*Mine*. My girlfriend... my El?”

“Hmm... I’ll allow it,” she teased again, grinning back at him. “*If*... you cuddle the shit out of me like you said you would.”

He immediately squeezed her so tightly she squeaked and then started kissing her face again as she huffed. His face ended up in the crook of her neck, nuzzling her warm skin and leaving tiny grateful kisses.

“I love you, El.”

The words made her shiver all over again and she wrapped her arms around his neck and sighed, feeling content. Despite being tired she was too happy to sleep, an uncommon excitement tickling her belly at this new prospect of being someone else’s. So instead they talked for a while longer, thinking up new ideas for his book, whispering about deep thoughts and laughing about stupid jokes, totally at ease. It could be awkward, all of it, but she felt so at ease in his arms. So happy and warm and safe.

That feeling bubbled up and despite her drooping eyelids she felt the thought fill her mind.

*I love him.*

The anxiety and fear appeared at the confession and he felt her tense, sighing sleepily and pulling her in closer, squinting his eyes open enough to look down at her.

“El, I love you,” he whispered, a kiss on her temple sealing the words.

The fear faded, just for a heartbeat, and she felt him slip into

unconsciousness, his breath slow and even as he entered the dream world, far away from her. She had shown him twice with her body the words that burned her tongue now, hoping it would be enough. And it had been. But now the fear was gone, the self-hatred dissolved as she let his words sink into her skin.

For the first time she let it out, the feeling of warm sunshine overflowing into the words she'd been denying so long, her lips buzzing, her eyes closing as the thing she now knew for certain escaped.

"I love you, Mike."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

i put a lot of foreshadowing in the previous chapter and this one too, i'm wondering if anyone is going to guess what's going to go wrong. probably not. it's kind of out of nowhere and i'm honestly really nervous it'll feel too random.

oH WELL.

i have the next chapter written and wow i'm depressed now. need to edit and keep pushing on but i have a big project due for my design class and i have no inspiration left to use on it so i need to like focus...

also today i found out a bunch of spoilers for stranger things 2 and wow i am seriously the happiest person ever i love spoilers. not sarcasm. i love spoilers i want to know everything ahead of time and no it doesn't ruin the experience for me because if i'm emotionally attached to a character or story i will feel everything whether or not it's a surprise. random fact.

anyways i'll try and update again soon. i realized the 24th was my one monthaversy of this fic and i'm so happy i've been able to keep up with it.



as always, i love those comments!

-g

## 15. How was I to know I'm not strong

### Notes for the Chapter:

#### TRIGGER WARNINGS:

mentions of suicide and kind of like idk like post-suicide feelings? just be careful.

i'm sorry it's been so long. honestly? i don't want the angst to happen so i've been avoiding it a little bit but i'm kind of excited also and i reALLY WANT TO FINISH THIS BEFORE STRANGER THINGS 2 because deadlines are helpful. so i'm going to keep pushing on.

this chapter was supposed to be posted like seven hours ago but i tried going to this new coffee shop to do homework and my social anxiety literally gave me a panic attack in the parking lot because of a new situation and wow that sucked. so i had to calm down and go home and now i'm FINALLY POSTING but yeah fall is the worst and i hate cold weather and new situations ugh.

i'm really sorry if you don't like what's about to happen but you just had fourteen chapters of slow burning romantic goodness so i hope you can let that buoy you until we reach that happy ending.

sorry tho

#### EDIT:

i forgot but the song i listened to on repeat while writing this chapter is called "this house" by edison glass and idk if you listen to it while reading (on repeat) it kind of sets a tone. music inspires me a lot when it comes to writing so i'm going to try and remember to add that to my notes for those of you who feel the same.

El's phone was ringing, but not any custom set ringtone and she groaned and rolled over, bumping into Mike's lanky frame. His arm was still around her and she ignored the standard ringtone that was emanating from her phone until it ended, the marimba quiet at last. Probably a wrong number.

Snuggling back into Mike she sighed happily, feeling a strange sense of contentment that she'd never felt before as his warm hand pulled her closer.

*Bzz bzz bzz bzz*

It went off again, the same unknown caller, and she huffed, annoyed and wondering who was disrupting such a perfect moment. Mike shifted, sharing her sentiment with a groan, his arms pulling her closer to his warm skin, letting out an annoyed huff.

"Make it stop," his lips tickled her forehead. "I'm cozy."

"It's not anyone I know."

"Then tell them to fuck off," he grumped. "I'm trying cuddle my girlfriend."

That word sent a sudden thrill through her and she decided it was excitement instead of fear. With a sigh she dragged herself from his arms, unsure of what to expect but walking across the room and swiping her phone off the floor as it rang. Sure enough it was a number she didn't recognize, but the area code was familiar and with another sigh she hit the green button.

"Hello?"

"Is this... Ellie?" It was woman's voice, someone El definitely didn't know.

"Who is this?" She felt something prickle her spine... only Max called her that.

"My name is Anna, I'm a nurse, you were listed in the emergency contacts in the phone of a young woman who was brought in this morning."

“Brought where?”

“The hospital.”

Her blood turned to ice.

“She has red hair and—”

“Max?! You have *Max*?”

“Yes, is that her name? She was brought in this morning with a stab wound that occurred sometime last night. Unfortunately she was out in the rain all night and the object used wasn’t clean, resulting in infection and the beginnings of pneumonia. If you could—”

El felt her knees give out, something bubbling up her throat, and then she threw up right there in the middle of the floor. It was pure panic, and it took a moment for her hearing to come back, the nurse’s voice faint in her ear as the black faded back to the edges of her vision, the world coming back into focus

“—Hospital. Can you give me her full name? Hello?”

“M-Max Mayfield,” she managed to gasp out. “Did her p-parents—”

“We were unable to get a hold of them. Do you have a different number we could call?”

“No. They’re not... her stepmom and brother aren’t close to her and she hasn’t talked to her dad in months. I’m her... we’ve been best friends since we were like nine, I’m all she has.”

“We’ll list you as the—”

“Is she going to d-die?”

Silence.

“It’s too early to tell, hon, we only just managed to get her in but she has good odds. The doctor can tell you more if you come—”

“I’m coming.”

She hung up and realized Mike was on his knees next to her, eyes full of concern and worry, having thrown some paper towels over her vomit on the floor. There was no way he knew what the conversation was about and he just looked alarmed.

“Was that your—”

“It’s Max. She’s at the hospital,” her eyes filled with tears. “She was *stabbed* last night.”

“*What?!*”

“I have to go, Mike. She... she needs me. I need t-to be th-there.”

Her whole body was trembling, the shock too much, and when she tried to stand her knees buckled again, sobs shaking her body. Mike caught her easily, pulling her to his chest while she sobbed out the panic and fear. She was almost catatonic but she kept seeing her friend’s face in her mind and pushed through the desire to collapse, stumbling towards the door.

“El, wait,” a gentle hand on her wrist. “You need to get dressed.”

“But she’s—”

“Come on, you can’t go out in those shorts,” he paused. “Your scars —”

“Fuck my scars, Mike, Max is fucking *dying!*” She exploded. “I need to be there, she needs me, she *needs* me!”

She was hysterical, fighting him as he held her again, this time letting her be angry, her fists pounding against his solid frame as she sobbed, babbling about not being there.

“El, you need to breathe, you need to put some warm clothes on and then I’ll take you to the hospital, okay?” His hands were warm but she couldn’t feel them. “Come on, I’ll help you.”

Everything became a blur as he helped her shove herself into a pair of leggings and a baggy sweater, her rain slicker and boots on her feet as they ran out of the dorm and across the campus to his car. The

panic came back as she sat in the passenger's seat, the world fading away as she pictured her best friend—no, her sister, lying on the ground in rain as her lifeblood seeped out of her.

She looked down at her phone with trembling hands, seeing the four missed calls. The six text messages that were unread. The single voicemail. She had ignored them last night, too wrapped up in her own desires. With a shaking hand she tapped the texts

8:32 PM: *Ellie, did you need anything from the grocery store?*

8:36 PM: *Okay, fine, don't reply. I bought you some Eggos anyways because I love you.*

9:03 PM: *It's raining like crazy I'm going to see if Dustin can give me a ride back.*

9:05 PM: *I think his phone is dead, are you busy? Are you with Mike? Do you think he could give me a ride? It's pouring like a motherfucker.*

9:06 PM: *You are with, Mike, aren't you? Or you're dead. You better not be dead, Ellie, or I'm going to kick your ass.*

9:08 PM: *I'm just going to walk, I guess. If your waffles are soggy it's not my fault.*

Then there were the four missed calls, two before the last two texts and two more ten minutes later. El could feel her heart pounding as she brought the phone up to her ear, listening to her best friend's familiar voice as it filtered through the tiny speaker, the voicemail playing.

"Eleven, you're the worst, just so you know. I hope whatever you're doing is better than rescuing me from this shitty rain—Hey, would you quit following me—God there's some asshole all up on me. I've got to go but I'm not letting you off the hook for this one. 'Kay, love you, bye."

El felt all the oxygen leave her body. Max's attacker. He'd been right there.

If she had answered the phone she would have known, she would

have been able to go and get her friend and kept her from getting hurt. Or at the very least found her before the morning.

How long had she laid there? Cold and wet and alone, wondering why her friend had abandoned her. Hadn't answered the phone. Hadn't bothered to care.

*I wasn't there when she needed me.*

Guilt flooded in, intense guilt made stronger by the anxiety of the unknown, both so intense her empty stomach jolted again and she dry-heaved. She didn't know what exactly would be waiting for her at the hospital, but then they were parking and sprinting for the entrance, bursting into the lobby and looking around wildly. There was a main desk and Mike headed for it, quickly explaining while El tried to catch her breath.

"Hi, we're looking for Max Mayfield, she was, um, stabbed and brought in this morning—"

"Fourth floor, room 414," the woman at the desk nodded. "But currently only family is being admitted are either of you—"

"I'm her sister," El blurted. "We're roommates at college, I just found out—"

"Can you prove that, sweetie?"

The women didn't look mean, just tired, like she'd heard this before. Mike jumped in.

"Max's parents live hours away and are out of town," he blurted. "They're all each other has, their households were abusive. They're sisters now, please," he pleaded. "They need each other."

The lady stared for a moment and then sighed, writing up a pass and handing it over.

"It's better she has someone there than no one—"

"She has a boyfriend too," Mike turned to El. "Wait, does Dustin even know?"

The thought of Dustin hadn't crossed her mind and she shrugged, not having a clue.

"I don't think so, I doubt she updated her emergency contacts since she got her phone last year, before they were dating," she blinked back fresh tears. "She's always terrible at updating that stuff..."

"You go, I'll call him, okay?"

She nodded, feeling numb, and then headed for the nearest elevator, leaving Mike behind at the desk, his phone to his ear. The guilt was even heavier now, knowing she'd forgotten about her best friend's *boyfriend*. Max would want him here too. She *loved* him.

El felt her heart freeze. That particular conversation had been yesterday. Had Max even had the chance to tell him? Did he know that she loved him, how he made her happy and warm? How excited she was to visit him during summer break and play D&D?

Would she even have the chance to tell him?

The need to see her intensified and as the elevator doors opened El almost bolted down the hallway, towards the room. It wasn't intensive care, but she got the feeling the people on this floor were the ones who needed to be closely monitored. The rooms were large, two patients to each, with glass windows that looked in.

She saw the numbers 414 and felt her heart rate skyrocket, the fear choking her throat as she looked into the window. A sob choked her throat.

Max was laying on a hospital bed, her red hair fanning across the pillow. She was asleep, but her face looked strained and ashen. She was so *pale*, paler than her usual complexion, and there were bruises that stood out, one on her chin and the other her temple, her right almost swollen entirely shut. The corner of her lip was cut too, the scab still fresh and red, and there was a myriad of tubes and wires connected to her, leading to IVs and monitors and a ventilator.

"Can I help you?"

El nearly jumped a foot in the air as gentle hand tapped her shoulder.



She turned to face a stern looking nurse, holding up her pass from the desk.

“M-Max, is she going to be okay? They said she was stabbed—”

“Are you family?”

“Y-Yes.”

The nurse sighed and looked into the room.

“She’s stable but if the pneumonia and infection isn’t fought off in the next forty-eight hours, she won’t last long. It’s too soon to tell, but she’s young and healthy. Her odds are good.”

“So she won’t d-die?” El felt the tears well up again.

“Not any time soon, sweetie. But we can’t make any promises until she’s woken up,” the nurse patted her gently. “The stab wound was shallow and didn’t hit anything vital. She didn’t lose too much blood. It was being in the cold rain all the night combined with what was probably a filthy knife. Her body has to fight it off.”

“C-Can I go in? She needs me to be there—”

“We’re not encouraging—”

“*Please*. She saved my life before... she stayed with me. I need be in there with her.”

The nurse blinked, like she was assessing the situation, then nodded.

“If you’re family anyways I can allow it.” She opened the door and lead El in. “There’s only two allowed at a time so—”

“I’m not leaving until she wakes up.”

“Hon, that might not be for days,” the nurse frowned. “Do you have someone to bring you clothing or food maybe?”

“I won’t leave her. She didn’t leave me.”

El fell into the chair next to the bed and grabbed Max’s hand, trying

to warm it with her own icy fingers. The nurse watched and then turned and left, nothing really left to say. So El let the tears come again, let them overflow and soak the white, sterile sheets. The only sound was the machine pushing air into Max's lungs and El's sobs, the sadness and fear and guilt racking her body so forcefully the whole bed shook.

*This is all my fault.*

She hadn't answered. Max had called and she'd made a deliberate decision to ignore it and stay with Mike instead. The previous night's events slammed into her—what she had done instead of answer the phone and run to her friend's aid. What she had let herself feel... what she had let herself say.

*It's all my fault.*

"El?"

Mike appeared, poking his head in the doorway, looking at Max with obvious worry in his eyes.

"Is she..."

"She's asleep. She won't wake up any time soon... and if she can't fight off the infection she w-won't wake up at *all*."

"El..." his hand was on her shoulder, rubbing her upper back. "I'm so sorry."

Something welled up inside of her, something bitter and dark and angry. This would never have happened if she hadn't let herself give in to him. If she hadn't let him in. If she hadn't decided he was more important than the only person who had ever given a damn about her in her life. She'd made a choice last night and now she realized she had chosen *wrong*.

She jerked herself away from him, turning her head to glare, the anger so strong she could taste it, like vomit, at the back of her throat.

"Don't *touch* me!" she snarled.

“Wha—”

“I should have been there, Mike! I should have answered the phone and gone to her but I was so fucking busy! Busy fucking *you*!”

He looked confused, pulling his hand back, not understanding where this was coming from but recoiling from her harsh words.

“Well, yeah, we were—”

“It was a mistake,” she shook her head. “I’m so stupid, I should never have—”

“Wait, back up,” he looked stricken. “You’re saying last night was a... *mistake*?”

“It shouldn’t have happened, Mike... I should never have let it happen. I should have answered that phone call and gone to her—”

“What, and been stabbed too?” He was getting angry at her rash words. “You can’t change what happened last night, El. Whether you regret it or not.”

He looked hurt but she didn’t care, the anger blinding her. It was like before, she wasn’t mad at him, she was mad at *herself* for how he made her feel. And last night he’d made her feel more than she ever had before, something foreign and amazing and perfect... and it had distracted her from caring about her best friend.

That’s what he was. What he’d always been. A *distraction*.

“I can’t change it but I can keep it from happening again,” she snapped and he looked confused.

“What?” He didn’t understand in the slightest. “Are you talking about having sex? We don’t have to anymore if that’s what—”

“Not the sex. *You*.”

“Wait, what? What are you saying, El?”

“I’m saying we’re *done*. Whatever it was between us, it’s over now.

I'm done."

"El," his face was stricken, like she'd punched him in chest, and she pulled her eyes away, not wanting to face the reality that was his existence. "El, come on, I know you're mad but this isn't about us."

She turned her head back to Max, staring at her friend's sleeping face, the anger turning to a low simmer. It was obvious what had caused this. She wouldn't let it happen ever again.

"Just leave me alone, Mike. Go away."

"But Max is—"

"*Get out!* I don't *want* you here!" she screamed, turning to look at him, face red with anger, eyes full tears. "Get out of my *life!*"

A nurse stuck her head in the door, looking alarmed and annoyed.

"If you don't keep it down I'll have to ask you to leave," she huffed. "There are other families here."

"It's fine, I was leaving anyways," Mike spat, suddenly angry, turning as she disappeared down the hallway.

He crashed into Dustin in the doorway, pulling back as the alarmed, curly-haired boy let out a grunt of surprise. Then his eyes landed on his girlfriend and what could only be described as a wail left his throat.

"Oh my god," he looked shaken. "Why does she—" his voice broke. "Why does she look like she's *dead?*"

"They don't know if she'll wake up," El told him, feeling tired and sad. "She has an infection and pneumonia, and if her body can't fight it off..."

"No, no way," Dustin fell to his knees, clutching her other hand like it was the only way to reassure himself she wasn't gone. "She can't die. She hasn't played D&D yet. Or watched the prequels with me. I told my parents... I... we..."

El hadn't been sure if Dustin could cry. He was always so happy, smiling and joking and laughing, like he didn't have a care in the world. But now the hospital bed shook as he sobbed, dripping tears onto Max's cold hand, begging her not to die.

"Come on, babe, we've got stuff to do. You're going to wake up," his voice broke, "please wake up, Max. Please."

It was heartbreaking and El felt her eyes fill with tears again as she looked at her best friend's unmoving face. She hadn't yet considered that it wouldn't happen. That Max wouldn't wake up. It had to happen... she couldn't live in a world where Max didn't exist. They wouldn't have survived without each other. How was she supposed to live without her now?

"Sh-She's gonna wake up, Dustin," her voice shook. "She can't just—there isn't any other option. She *has* to wake up."

"But—"

"Don't. Just don't, okay? She's not going to leave me, she wouldn't," El blinked more tears out of her eyes, biting her lip. "And she won't leave you either. She... she loves you. And she doesn't leave people she loves, she just doesn't. That's not something anyone should do and I'm not going to leave her alone again. I p-promise."

Mike was still standing in the doorway, watching the broken people in front of him. El's words didn't mean as much to Dustin as they did to Mike and he stared at her, watching her make the choice. She'd never told him she loved him and now she was telling him to leave. Promising to stay with Max. When had it become a choice between one or the other?

When she'd ignored her friend's call and landed her in the hospital.

But it wasn't anyone's fault... Max hadn't known she was going to get assaulted. She should have made it home, soaked to the bone and freezing, but safe. It just... hadn't happened that way. It wasn't El's fault or Dustin's fault or Mike's fault. It was just what had happened.

But El couldn't accept that. She hadn't been there for her friend, her

sister. The only person who had ever understood her. The person who had pulled her from a bloody tub, crying and praying as the ambulance drew closer, holding her until she'd awoken with bandages on her wrists. Max had given her everything and El had thanked her with this.

So it had become a choice, between the boy she called sunshine and the girl who had saved her life. And he had come out the loser.

There was no way he could accept that, no way he would allow her to blame herself for an accident, and he moved to go to her, wanting to tell her the truth she couldn't see.

"El—"

"I'm sorry, but we only allow two visitors at a time up here," another nurse appeared behind him.

El didn't even look towards him, her eyes closed tightly, like she wanted to pretend he wasn't there at all. His presence hurt too much, a reminder of what she'd let happen and he realized there was no way he was going to get through to her. Not until Max woke up.

He sighed heavily but stepped back, deciding to wait. If he could make her see reason, see that it wasn't her fault and that they didn't have to break apart because of this... his heart yearned to go to her and he sighed again as he let the words go for now.

"Um, it's okay, I was just leaving," he mumbled, eyes flicking to Dustin. "Hey, buddy, I'm going to leave so you can stay. Text me if you need anything, I'll tell Will and Lucas what's up. And... call me if she gets... better."

"Okay," Dustin croaked, still numb.

Mike left, his familiar footsteps disappearing down the hallway, and El let her shoulders relax. She couldn't even look at him, couldn't think about it. Max needed her now, more than Mike ever had, and she promised to not leave her again. She looked over at Dustin.

"Do you want the chair? I was going to..."

She had a flashback to when she was sixteen, her bleary eyes blinking open wearily, her whole body feeling tired and drained. Her wrists had been wrapped in layers of gauze, and there had been something warm on her side. She'd turned her head and looked down, spotting the familiar red tangle of hair spread across her shoulder, Max's breathe warm on her arm. Her friend looked exhausted and greasy, curled up on El like a cat.

"M-Max?" she'd croaked, unsure of how she'd ended up there but feeling more tired than she ever had in her entire life. And sad. And disappointed. She wasn't supposed to wake up... that had been the point. But now she was awake and weary and ashamed. "Max?"

Her friend had shot upright like she'd been shocked, eyes huge.

"Ellie?"

"Max, what's—oof!"

The redhead had tackled her, squeezing her so tightly she gasped, before breaking into sobs, holding El like she would disappear.

"Eleven, you scared me I thought you were *dead*," she sobbed, "I thought you were going to die you were so cold and there was so much blood—"

"Max," her own eyes had watered as the overwhelming shame flooded her. "I'm s-sorry. I'm so sorry."

There wasn't a whole lot to say. Max's eyes were filled with terror and relief as she clung to her best friend, whose gauze-covered wrists were tied to the bed with padded leather shackles. So she wouldn't do it again. El had tugged at them and then winced, looking back at Max, who was crying so hard her eyes were bloodshot, too dehydrated to make any more tears as she begged El with fear-filled sobs.

"Don't leave me, Ellie, you're all I have. I thought I was going to lose you. I can't lose you."

"I'm sorry, Max. I'm sorry."

It had been quiet as they just held each other and cried, their sisterhood sealed as El let her friend's tears soak the front of her hospital gown, feeling guilty and like even more of a failure as she tried to wrap her tied up arms around her.

She'd wanted to die and she'd failed. She wasn't even good at dying, the one thing that everyone did eventually. But... was that the best thing? She'd wanted to stop feeling. Feeling like a failure. Feeling like some sort of bizarre creature that didn't belong. Nothing she did was right, everything hurt, and she'd just wanted to leave it all behind, to be free. To finally make Papa feel something that wasn't just... disappointment. Maybe he would realize what he had done every time he pushed her down and away.

Suicide had felt like the only thing left. Less of a choice and more of a final option. But she had realized she was wrong.

Max's face was pressed against her neck, so warm and alive, and she realized how stupid and selfish she'd been. She thought her best friend would be better off without her, without having to worry about her and clean her cuts and try to cheer her up when it wasn't possible. The rings under Max's eyes had deepened as El's depression grew, and she wanted to set her free from the burden that was her friendship.

But Max needed her too. Needed her alive and breathing, to hold her when the nightmares of smashing glass and angry fists and red blood on the floor crept in. Without her, Max would have to go back to the house that haunted her in the form of screaming terrors in the night.

*How could I have been so selfish?* she thought, *to take away the only safe home she's ever had.*

She wouldn't do it again.

"I-I'll talk to someone, Max," she'd whispered. "I'll get help. I won't do this again. I promise."

"I love you, Ellie. I love you, please, don't hurt yourself anymore, I can't stand it."



"I w-won't, Maxie. I love you too. I'm sorry."

And she had meant it. The depression hadn't left, but she'd let Max in all the way. They'd learned together what she needed, sometimes just to talk, sometimes someone to pick her up and carry her. Max never complained, taking care of her sister so lovingly that El never doubted her. Through the therapists and medications and the whispers at school the thing that had worked best had just been... love.

She *needed* love.

"You can keep the chair, El."

Dustin's voice brought her back and she looked over at him, his face wet from the tears.

"No, you can have it... I was going to lay with her. Like she did for me."

"Huh?"

"When I was in the hospital, back in high school. Did she... did she ever tell you about that?"

"No, she said you had some emotional stuff but she mostly just told me so I wouldn't ask... she was always really protective of you," he shrugged, clearly curious.

Her heart panged as she looked at Max again. Always so loyal and discreet, even when talking to her boyfriend. She decided he deserved the truth, since nothing was really worse than the reality lying on the bed in front of them.

"When I was sixteen I tried to kill myself and Max found me, saved me, and stayed with me until I woke up over two days later. She's never let me down and now she needs me so..." She crawled onto the bed, oh so carefully, laying on her side and cradling her friend, wrapping her arms around her.

Dustin was quiet, but got up and scooted the chair even closer, clutching Max's hand. He seemed to be ruminating on her story,

nodding like something had just clicked into place. That definitely cleared up a few things.

“Is that why you’ve been all weird about Mike?”

She tensed, wondering how this was a relevant question at a time like this. But she wasn’t about to snap at him when they were both so raw and vulnerable, sighing heavily instead.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“Like why you’ve been back and forth and won’t date him? Cause of your, um, emotional stuff?”

Part of her wanted to get pissed, like she had when Mike had made assumptions about her scars. But she was just so tired and it seemed like such a small thing now.

“Yeah, kind of. But that’s...” her hands clenched into fists. “That’s over now. We’re done. So don’t worry about it.”

“Woah, what?”

“Yeah, um, it’s... kind of fresh. Maybe don’t mention it to him.”

“El, you can’t—”

“Dustin it’s my fault she’s like this,” the tears were back. “I was with Mike last night and we... I heard her calling me and I ignored it to be with him. I *ignored* her, Dustin. She left me a voicemail and she was —” she couldn’t breathe, the panic almost taking over. “The bastard who did this was following her and she called me and *I didn’t answer.*”

He looked stunned and she waited for the anger to fill him. For him to start yelling at her and telling her how thoughtless and selfish she had been, how it was all her fault.

But he just shook his head.

“El, she called me too. My phone was dead and I forgot to charge it when I got back to my room. I should have answered too, but I was

too stupid and *lazy*... I would have been there, I would have picked her up after my club meeting if I had just plugged in my fucking phone!”

He pulled it from his pocket, showing her the texts, similar to the ones she'd received. And the three missed calls, the single voicemail. There was the same guilt in his eyes, the one that was filling her like sand in hourglass, trickling down and making her feel heavier and heavier with each grain that fell. She blinked, unsure how to feel about his confession.

“I heard mine ring. I made her vibration the heartbeat, so I would always know it was her,” she gave him a watery smile. “And now it's all I can hear.”

“Her ringtone on my phone is ‘Pour Some Sugar On Me’,” he grinned, eyes full of the same tears. “It's always been her song.”

“She does love Def Leppard.”

The both looked at Max, as if naming her favorite band would suddenly make her open her eyes and start singing, laughing at their worry. But the only sound was the whooshing ventilator, pumping in the oxygen that her lungs were too weak to take in themselves. Not even a twitch.

El rested her head on Max's shoulder, cuddling into her like they had at their countless sleepovers. At first El had shied away from the constant physical contact, but Max had been relentless, always holding her hand or her arm or snuggling close. She had won and they rarely slept without their legs touching when they shared a bed, the familiar comfort shared. The one they'd always been denied from their families.

“Dustin?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for taking care of her when I didn't.” A pause. “Thanks for... loving her. She needed someone like you.”

“Like me?” he sounded like he didn't want to believe her.

She didn't turn her head but let her hazel-browns meet his deep blue eyes, wanting him to know she was telling the truth.

"You make her laugh," that was the obvious one, "and you feed her. Which seems like nothing but she was always hungry when we were little. Her parents didn't really care. When we first met—well, after the detentions—I noticed she never had lunch. That was part of the reason we became friends so fast. I always shared my lunches but I didn't ask why she didn't have one, I just kind of made her eat."

"My mom used to make these huge dinners back home... that's just one of those things," he interjected, blinking. "Everyone should eat when they're hungry... that's just... that's not like something you can live without."

"She used to live without it," El shrugged, pushing on. "But you always make sure she isn't hungry. And you never get mad."

At that he snorted, his thumb gently stroking Max's knuckles, like an automatic reaction.

"Have you seen me lose at Mario Kart?"

El snorted too. "Well, yeah. But that's just being a sore loser. I mean like... *angry* mad. When you guys fight—"

"She told you about that?"

"—when you guys fight she's always the one who screams. You're so calm and you make her talk until you both figure it out. Have you ever broken anything on accident around her? Like a bottle or something?"

"No..."

"She flinches. Every time. The sound of shattering glass, when you slam something, when you get pissed and punch something. Her brother and parents fought physically a lot. Their house was always in pieces," El sighed. "She never forgot those sounds. She's never stopped flinching and waiting to be hit next."

"I didn't know that."

El looked over at him, the blank look on his face.

“She doesn’t talk about her feelings much. That was always my thing. But I think you deserve to know that. What you are to her.”

*In case she can't tell you herself.* The silent possibility hung heavy in the air but the two ignored the fear that was weighing them down, not wanting to speak it into reality. Dustin nodded, staring down at the cold hand again.

“Thanks, El.”

The silence filled the room, the one where there just wasn’t anything else to say. It was just the waiting now, waiting and hoping and praying that she would wake up. El’s mind wandered to what she didn’t want to think about.

About Mike.

The look on his face when she’d told him to get out. When she’d said that he had been a mistake. Their night together kept replaying itself in her mind. The sex had been kind of amazing, but she’d told him they could be official and she was realizing now how stupid and impulsive that had been. She had wanted to make him as happy as he had made her but that had been foolish. There were certain things that she wasn’t allowed to be, and happy was the big one. Why else had she been tormented by sadness for so long?

But she’d seized it anyways with greedy hands and this was the punishment.

So she’d pushed away the thing that had made her explosively happy. And that thing was Mike. He was nothing to her now. She was done. Done pretending that she could what she felt when she was with him.

Feel happy.

Because when she was happy... terrible things happened. And this time they had happened to Max. Nothing was worth that, losing her best friend. Not even the boy she lov—

*Stop it. You were just caught up in the moment,* she convinced herself. *It*

*wasn't true, you were delusional. Crazy. You said what he wanted to hear just to make him happy, you're such a people-pleasing bitch. Now he thinks he means something to you.*

But he had been asleep when she'd said it and she knew it. He didn't know she loved him, he was acting purely on the hope.

The cracks were appearing in her lie and she pushed it away before it could collapse. It wouldn't have worked out anyways, she was stupid to think Papa would do anything but loathe Mike for distracting her. She would be sent back to the estate, without Max this time, and there was no way she could live there... she wouldn't survive the isolation.

Silent tears poured down her cheeks as sudden sadness filled her soul, pouring into her entire being. It was grief, calm and unspoken and unbearable. She grieved for Max, for what had happened due to her own negligence. She grieved for Dustin and the terror evident in his eyes as he faced the reality of losing the first girl he'd ever loved. She grieved for the future, the crystal bridge to the happy fantasy snapped, the reality of the who she was plunging her back into the darkness she was determined would be her only home.

And she grieved for her shattered heart. The one she'd broken herself as she'd screamed at Mike and told him to get out of her life. Because despite how much it ached and hurt, it was the one promise she was going to keep. He had no place in her life. No claim on who she would be.

She closed her eyes, wanting to just sleep and wake up when it was all over, so she didn't have to feel the heartache that radiated through her entire body. If only she could take a quick nap and wake up with everything back to the way it was, Max at her side as they faced the world.

"I'm here, Max," she whispered into her friend's ear. "I won't leave you alone again."

A heavy breath. A broken heart.

"I promise."

## Notes for the Chapter:

there's going to be more of an explanation for what happened to max later. it's not completely random but i did want it to come out of nowhere. because that's how life is. everything is great until it just isn't and it's not about things being perfect it's about how you overcome.

again, this story is about love but it's not just a love story, it's a story about el and her journey to acceptance, not just for mike but for herself as well. it's hard journey and it's not always going to be fun to read but i want it to be real so... sorry?

thank you for all of the amazing comments last chapter. you guys were making me cry and i'm so grateful for each and every one of you. truly. <3

feel free to rant at me if you need to, or even theorize what's to come. sometimes i give hints if you're close. ;)

sorry aGAIN pain isn't fun but it's part of life.

-g

## 16. It was never quite like this before

### Notes for the Chapter:

short chapter sorry. i wanted this to go up earlier but i got that friggin stranger things game on my phone and spent like three days beating it but i FINISHED IT HAHAAAA.

and then yesterday i crashed my car and i've been a little shaken up so i was hoping posting would help me get out of that mindset. i'm okay physically so don't worry but that's the first accident i've ever been in where i was driving and now my anxiety when i drive is crazy stupid. :C oh well.

this is the waiting, so not only is everyone waiting for max to wake up but so are we. next chapter gets deeper. and longer. i'll try and post that on tuesday but i can't make any promises yet.

“Hey, wake up. I brought you coffee.”

El groaned as a hand shook her shoulder. She was back in the chair, after the nurses scolded her every time they found her cuddled up with her friend, and she'd fallen asleep half on the bed, her head resting on Max's leg. She coughed, feeling gross, but finally blinked her eyes open and looked towards Dustin, who was holding a cup of coffee, which she took gratefully.

It had been almost two days and they hadn't left Max's side. They would take turns going down to the hospital cafeteria, and Dustin had even run back to campus to pick up some fresh clothing. But El barely left the room, even to use the bathroom, too afraid of what would happen if she left Max alone again.

But the tough redhead hadn't gotten worse, her condition stable as her body fought, trying to expel the infections that threatened to pull her away. El had faith. Max had always been fit, even if her eating habits were less than desirable. The doctor came by during her



rounds, checking Max and telling her frantic loved ones that it was just a waiting game. A cruel game.

So they waited.

“The Price is Right is on again,” Dustin rumbled. “Wanna watch?”

“Sure,” El sighed.

There was nothing better to do. At first the TV had been a nuisance, taking her focus away from Max, but now she welcomed the distraction, just wanting the time to pass. The anxiety hadn’t left her, and focusing on Drew Carey’s face as someone lost at Plinko helped. But she hadn’t been able to eat, all the food at the hospital less than desirable and anything that went down coming back almost immediately. She’d mostly had coffee and a few protein shakes out of the vending machine, her stomach too tense to accept actual food.

“Is Bob Barker still alive?”

“Who fucking knows.”

They stared aimlessly at the screen and El drank her coffee, keeping her other hand on Max’s fingers, wanting to keep a connection in case something changed. She felt tired. She barely slept, only bits and pieces when she couldn’t keep her eyes open, disturbed by the nurses and doctors doing their rounds or Dustin’s occasional quiet talking.

He did that a lot, talked to Max. El tried not to listen, knowing it wasn’t something she needed to hear, but it was hard when he was only a few feet away. He told Max about the latest episode of Rick and Morty, what new discussion he’d read on reddit, the latest theory for season two of Westworld. It was like he needed to pretend she wasn’t unconscious, like nothing had changed, talking about the familiar stuff they always did.

It broke El’s heart.

She knew there was no point trying to apologize yet, keeping the self-loathing and sorrow in, only occasionally letting the tears seep out again as she clutched her friend’s hand.

“Hey, guys.”

There was the squeak of balloons and El turned to see Lucas and Will in the doorway, peering through a cloud of colorful, rubber orbs. It was ridiculous and she allowed herself a small, friendly smile as they walked towards the bed. Dustin sat up straighter.

“You brought her balloons?” He seemed confused but appreciative.

“She didn’t really seem like the flower type,” Will said softly, staring with wide eyes at Max’s unmoving body.

“You’re not wrong,” El piped in. “The only bouquets she likes are those candy bar ones.”

It was tense as Lucas and Will finally saw with their own eyes the severity of the situation and how exhausted and broken their childhood friend was. Lucas went to Dustin, gripping his shoulder firmly as if to try and silently assure him he wasn’t alone. Will came forward too, looking over at El and holding out a to-go container that was in his hand.

“Um, I’m supposed to give this to you,” he said, setting it in front of her.

Curious, she opened it, seeing a golden-brown waffle dripping with syrup. Her stomach rumbled loudly and she looked up at Will, surprised.

“Mike sent it,” he explained with a shrug. “I’m just the delivery boy.”

The hunger faded, replaced with a hive of anxiety that twisted her stomach into a tight, painful knot. She closed the lid and set it down, not wanting to look at the proof she couldn’t escape. She’d basically told him to fuck off and he was still being nice, being caring, and it made her want to throw up. Why didn’t he understand what she was trying to do? What she was trying to save them both from?

“You’re not going to eat it?” Lucas asked, eyebrows scrunched up. “I thought waffles were like your thing.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Her stomach growled loudly again, exposing her lie, but she set her jaw stubbornly and looked away.

“Yeah, okay,” he snorted. “Definitely not hungry at all. Did Mike piss you off or something?”

“Lucas,” Dustin rumbled quietly, shaking his head. “Drop it.”

“Drop what? They two were all over each other, am I supposed to pretend like this isn’t weird?”

“It’s not...” she closed her eyes with a sigh, rubbing her temples tiredly. The last thing she wanted to do was think about or talk about it or have anything to do with it. “We’re not anything. We never were. Mike just hasn’t figured that out yet.”

It was the simplest explanation without revealing the messy truth or going too far into detail. She was aware that they were his friends first, that they were allowed to take his side. But she wasn’t sure if she could handle anyone ganging up on her right now and pushed the waffle further away from her with her foot, wanting to ignore it completely.

*It’s for the better, she reminded herself. He’ll find someone else anyways. Someone less broken and messy. Someone who truly deserves him.*

Because despite the words that had left her mouth that night they’d held each other and bared their souls, she knew it was all too good to be true. Her scarred mess of a life would only drag him down. The doubt that had first come to her on the bench before the storm that started the dominos that had lead them here.

*Your darkness will snuff him out.*

It was easier this way. She would go back to how it was before, with her and Max facing the world together, always there for each other. They had always managed. She didn’t *need* him to feel okay about her life. It would be better. He would be better. Better off without her.

“Is it his promise thing again?” Lucas wouldn’t drop it, staring at her with narrowed eyes.

“Probably,” she shrugged, annoyed. “Just leave it alone.”

A pause. “Okay, sure, whatever.”

The quiet awkwardness was back and Dustin glanced around the room, his usual need to fill the silence back again. He cleared his throat.

“Thanks for coming, guys. She would be happy you’re here if she was —” He cut himself off and tried to shake it off. “Thanks for the balloons, they’re stupid.”

“Stupid like you, lardass,” Lucas grinned giving his friend a loving shove, trying to lighten the mood back up.

“Shut it, pencil dick!” He shot back, grinning just as widely.

They always argued and insulted and were terrible to each other and it was piece of much needed normality that had been stolen by the somber situation, a bit of a relief. El found herself smiling at how comforting it was to hear them be dicks to each other, their friendship very much intact.

She looked back at Max, feeling her heart shiver in fear. More than anything she wanted her friend back too. The inside jokes and comforting handholding and even the nagging. El never thought she’d miss the nagging but she did.

Lucas and Dustin were talking about some video game and Will wandered closer to her, voice low as he looked at her with his usual kind, understanding eyes.

“If you want to talk about it you can always stop by my room.”

“Huh?”

“About Mike,” he glanced towards Max. “Sometimes it helps to talk about it and I know he’s been my friend longer but if you want I don’t mind being a neutral space.”

She blinked. “What makes you think I need to talk about it?”

"You won't eat your favorite food just because he was the one who sent it," Will shrugged, his gaze intensifying. "You don't want anything to do with him all of the sudden. That kind of shift isn't just..." he sighed. "I'm not saying you have to talk to me. I just thought I'd offer."

She felt her shoulders drop, the ball of twisted emotions inside of her tugging towards the warm offer. He wasn't wrong, but she wasn't sure yet if it would help.

"I'll... think about it," she mumbled, before daring to meet his eyes. "Thanks, Will."

"No problem, El."

The two left after ten more minutes, unsure of what to say and do in the situation. Soon the only sound was the TV, dingling loudly as an excited contestant won a trip to Japan. The visit had been nice, but it brought back just how serious the situation. How far they'd come from their usual lives.

The hours slipped by, punctuated by the nurses checking Max's vitals and giving them hopeful smiles. Her breathing didn't waver, and El thought she looked less pale, the color coming back a bit in her face. But she was still so cold... her hands were like ice and El's own icy fingers did little to help. Dustin was better at that, so El once again ended up lying next to her friend, trying to just let her know she wasn't alone.

It was getting late, past midnight, and the exhaustion was winning, her eyes drifting shut as she rested her head on Max's shoulder, letting the steady breathing lull her to sleep.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

like i said, kind of short. informative. it's not fun waiting. that's the point. i promise next chapter is gonna have a lot more backstory and such, both with el and max.

el is stubborn. like me. i want her to love him just as

much as you guys do but gawwwwwd is it going to take a lot for her let that happen. again, i promise it'll be a happy ending. we're just run through the gauntlet of pain to get there haha.

thanks for the awesome comments last chapter, i've been so busy and i feel terrible not replying but i'm going to tRY TO I PROMISE. I LOVE YOU ALL SO MUCH SERIOUSLY YA'LL MAKE ME CRY.

but yeah, sorry.

-g

## 17. You don't gain a single thing from misery

### Notes for the Chapter:

I KNOW I SAID TUESDAY BUT I WROTE LIKE TWO CHAPTERS and i had to post one because i'm really trying to push through and get all of this done before season two. eighteen days, can you believe it?? oh god i'm sweating.

this one is longer than last time and i put in some stuff i just... forgot to before heh. like how max can afford college and more about el's "family". i feel better now whew.

anyways i still haven't replied to comments because i'm terrible but i'm gonna try my best because i love all of you so very much. i'm so grateful for each and everyone of you for giving me the courage to write a story that comes from such a personal place. thank you. <3

Something was tickling El's face, and she reached up to brush it away, startling at the feeling of long hair. She bolted upright, but then remembered where she was and who she was with, looking over at Max, who was squinting, eyes blinking open slowly. She was awake? She was awake!

"Ellie?" she croaked, voice hoarse and scratchy, her ventilator tube in her hand.

El almost fell off the bed.

"Max!"

Her arms wrapped around her friend, who winced but hugged back, and then El was sobbing so fiercely she couldn't see or speak, the relief crashing over her like a wave. The shout woke up Dustin who sat up in the chair, looking confused in the dim light. Then his eyes focused in on Max—who was being squished by El's arms—but who

was definitely awake and alive and in front of him. He reached out, like he was almost afraid she wasn't real.

"Max?" he breathed.

"Hey, b-babe," she said with a weak smile, eyes full of love.

El pulled back and then Dustin was crushing his girlfriend in his arms almost lifting her off of the bed as he buried his face in her hair, body shaking with silent sobs of relief. El watched the two, feeling something in her heart pang as they reunited. Max was crying too, holding onto Dustin like he was the lifeline she'd been clinging to the whole time.

*She doesn't need you anymore.*

She tried to push the thought away. Of course Max needed her. They would always need each other, or at the very least always want to need each other. They were sisters—nothing could shake the bond they'd built since they were nine, the one full of scraped knees and dancing to Cascada's Every Time We Touch at sleepovers and fighting bullies side by side in high school. They were unbreakable.

But now Max needed Dustin too.

The two were talking softly and El leaned away, jumping off the bed and slapping the call button, wanting the nurses and doctors to come. The next half hour passed by in a blur of relieved crying and hugging as the medical professionals checked Max's vitals and brought her a tray of food, making sure she was well enough to eat, rechecking her wound.

"I'm going to call the guys," Dustin said with a grin. "Be right back."

It had been a rough three days and El knew his friends would be happy to know that Max was more or less on the mend. As he left the room El reached out and grabbed her sister's hand, both sharing a watery smile. They didn't need to say what this situation felt like, remembering the last time they were in a hospital together.

"Max—" El's voice choked. "I'm so sorry. I heard you calling and I ignored it and—"



“Ellie, don’t be dumb, it’s not your fault.”

“But it is,” she bit her lip as her eyes filled with tears. “You called me because you needed me and I chose not to answer. I put you second and that wasn’t fair and I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Her voice broke and then she was sobbing out the guilt that had been weighing her down as Max stared. Warm hands gripped her shoulders, pulling her up and she was crying into her best friend’s shoulder as Max tried to soothe her.

“Eleven, it’s not your fault, okay? Nothing could have stopped this from happening. You can’t blame yourself for something that was out of your control.”

“B-But it is my fault, Max. I let myself be happy instead of being there for you. You know what happens when I’m happy...” she pulled back enough to wipe some snot away. “Bad things happen and this time they happened to you.”

“You were happy?”

“I... I was with Mike—”

Max gasped, a wide smile lighting up her face. She grabbed El’s hands, the familiar eager, excited expression on her face.

“You were with Mike? What were you guys doing?” She smirked. “What was so important that you couldn’t answer the phone?”

“We had sex,” El blurted, then immediately turned bright pink as Max’s mouth dropped open.

“*What?!*”

El put her face into her hands and groaned, wishing she’d kept that a secret for bit longer. But it had been eating at her, how new it had been and good it had been and the turmoil it was causing inside of her. And the guilt again, for choosing that night with Mike over her best friend. But Max looked utterly delighted.

“Ellie, oh my god, tell me everything, please. Was it good? Wasn’t it

his first time too? Oh my god two virgins, I bet it was super cute,” she gushed before quirking an eyebrow deviously. “Did he make you —”

“Can we *not*?! I just told you I was having sex instead of... saving you! Why aren’t you angry at me?” she felt outraged. “You should want to kick my ass!”

The redhead blinked, suddenly looking exhausted and El immediately felt bad for yelling. Before she could apologize Dustin stuck his head back in, still deliriously happy, holding his phone up.

“The guys will be here soon, they’re super excited you’re awake,” he grinned, but then frowned as he noticed how tired she looked again. “Or do you need to rest...?”

Max smiled, albeit weakly, and shook her head. “No, I want to see them. I’m just a little tired and really hungry... I don’t suppose you could sneak me some Oreos from somewhere? Or maybe some Doritos...” she looked down at the plate of steamed broccoli she’d been given and winced sourly. “Anything but this, honestly.”

“Of course, babe. I’ll run to the caf,” he said before almost bolting from the room.

She watched her boyfriend go with fond eyes, sighing happily before turning back to El, reaching for her hands and holding them firmly.

“Ellie, it wouldn’t have mattered if you’d come the second I called. You couldn’t have stopped it from happening.”

“But—”

“It was Billy, El,” Max’s voice broke. “I saw his face. He talked to me. Told me I was—”

"Billy did this?!"

Max cracked, the tears leaking out as her grip on El’s hands tightened.

“He’s always blamed me for how it was at home. I mean my dad and

his mom... they shouldn't have been together to begin with but she hated me and he did too and my dad didn't care that they were terrible—”

“I know, Max. He used to hit you.”

“I thought I was finally away, you know? But apparently my dad... he was drunk and he was saying how much better I am than Billy. How I didn't fuck up everything and was in college and... god, El, you know my dad, he's never been proud of me before. I don't know why...” she sobbed again, wincing as the motion ripped at her wound. “I don't know why he is now. But Billy was so mad, he said I was shit and I should have died when he burned the house down the first time—”

“Wait, *he* was the one who set your house on fire?” El's eyes were saucers.

The first time Max had stayed the night at the Brenner estate had been after the fire. They had been barely ten and the house had burned down at night, while Max had been sleeping inside. A neighbor called the fire department who had managed to pull her out before the flames had consumed the entire structure. Her parents had been gone and Billy claimed he'd left to pick up some friends from a party. The whole thing had been ruled an accident.

“I never told you... I didn't want you to be worried, Ellie. You had already done so much and I stayed at your house most of the times anyways.”

“That's *attempted murder*! He tried to kill you...” she couldn't pretend like she wasn't completely outraged. “Again!”

“It's not that big of a deal—”

“*He stabbed you and left you die,*” El ground out, her teeth clenched in anger. “And Max, I love you with all my heart but if you don't tell the cops... *I will.*”

Max's eyes filled with panic.

“El, I can't. He's all his mom has and she'll go nuts and my dad—”

“Your dad will what? He never took care you, Max. He isn’t going to start now. They need to know the truth... Billy is a *murderer* and he needs to be locked up! This is... is literally insane, he fucking stabbed you oh my *god*.”

“Who stabbed you?”

Dustin appeared in the doorway looking like he’d just ransacked a vending machine, his arms overflowing with snack-sized bags of chips and cookies and candy bars. His eyebrows were raised in alarm and Max shrank back, her mouth open but no words coming out. El realized he didn’t know either, but was still stuck on the fact that Max hadn’t told her *anything*.

“I-I... it was—”

“You know who it was?” He was at her side, the junk food dropping onto the tray in front of her and falling onto the ground. “Who was it?! Tell me, so I can go and kick their ass!”

He shouted the words into her face she immediately flinched away, face pained. El could almost see his heart drop to the floor as he realized his mistake.

“Shit, babe, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to yell,” he apologized profusely, voice fifty decibels softer. “But if you know who it was we need to tell the cops. They deserve to be caught.”

“He deserves to know, Maxie,” El added softly. “Tell him what you told me.”

Max’s chin wobbled and then she nodded, more tears spilling down her cheeks, staring down at her hands.

“Tell me what?” Dustin looked understandably confused as he reached for her hands again.

She sniffed and rubbed at her eyes, “I’ve told you about my stepbrother before, right? Well...”

El left them, deciding they needed some space. She had assumed her best friend had opened up more to her boyfriend and was little

nervous she'd told him so much about Max's past. But he did deserve to know and she hoped her friend would be honest with him.

*She didn't tell me about Billy earlier.*

It stung and it was impossible to pretend like she wasn't bothered by Max's secret. They never kept secrets from each other... or at least nothing this big. She tried to put herself in her best friend's shoes, imagining what it would be like to have one of her older siblings hate her. But it was hard because she didn't even know most of them that well.

As far as she knew she was the last orphan baby that Dr. Martin Brenner adopted. It had started in the eighties with the first three, all biological siblings. They were all scientists now, two with Nobel prizes and the third in the running. Then four more children at once, all different ages and ethnicities, who had all ended up as types of artists, one a dancer, another a painter, a musician, a National Geographic photographer, all wildly successful. Then two twins, the girl a model and her brother a fashion designer, still partners as they attended and showed at every fashion week on the planet.

Those were the ones she only saw when they had "reunions", who rarely talked to her or even acted like she existed. They didn't understand how she could be such a failure after being supported and taken care of like they had been. But none of them had been alone in the big mansion... not like El had been.

None of them but Roman.

She was the only one El sort of considered family, though they looked nothing alike thanks to the miracle of adoption, with dark skin and hair that contrasted to El's pale skin and pink tones. But she was the only one who knew what it was like to live alone in a giant house of disappointment and loneliness. She worked in some branch of the government and couldn't make it to the family gatherings as often, but when she did she always made a point to talk to El and ask her how she was.

After the suicide attempt she'd cornered El at a Thanksgiving dinner in Cabo, slipping her a piece of paper with a number on it.

"I'm not saying you have to talk to me about anything," Roman's eyes had been serious. "But if it gets to be too much again... if he makes you want to do that again, you can call me and I'll get you away from there."

"Why do you care?" El had snapped. "None of the others do."

"Because he made me feel the same way and..." the older woman had sighed. "I shouldn't have let him adopt you in the first place. I knew what it was like to live there alone with him and I could have stopped it," there was guilt in her dark eyes. "You're the only one he chose as a baby and I don't know what game he's play but he's a lying, cold hearted bastard. I don't trust him and I never will. I get it, you don't have to trust me. But... I wanted you to have a way out that doesn't involve *death*. Is that fair?"

El had been cautious but took the paper anyways, adding the number to her phone under an inconspicuous name so Papa wouldn't know. But she'd never felt the need to use the lifeline, too afraid that it would take her from Max. And Roman said nothing, doing the usual check-in when they saw each other but never pushing. They were *almost* family.

El tried to imagine having Roman hate her so much she wanted to kill her but failed, unable to understand that sort of motivation. She'd always known Billy was the black cloud in Max's life, like Papa was in hers, but she had never realized just how serious the situation was. Would she really have believed Max if she'd told her about the fire?

*Of course I would have.*

But there was a flicker of doubt and she sighed, walking down the hallway and doing a lap, just to calm her mind while giving the couple their privacy. It gave her time to think and after doing nothing but worry for the past three days she wasn't sure what to even think about. But the fear that Max didn't need her anymore surfaced again and she tried to shake it off as she finished her loop of the corridor, heading for the bathroom to pee.

When she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror she shuddered. She hadn't showered since... the rain storm? If that counted. Dustin

had brought her the change of clothes she'd had stashed in his room but that had been yesterday and the clothes were rumpled now, her hair greasy and her face oily. She felt the grime she'd been too worried to notice and splashed water on her face, trying to at least rinse off some of the dirt. It didn't work and she sighed, deciding to head back to the room.

But the door was shut and she frowned, reaching for the knob.

"You can't go in, the cops are interviewing her. They kicked us out too."

She froze, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath before turning to face the voice she already knew.

"They said it won't take long," Mike winced sympathetically. "But, uh, they told us not to come in so..."

"Oh."

Lucas came up behind him, huffing in annoyance and leaning against the wall, crossing his arms. Clearly he was displeased at being kicked out. Will was nowhere to be seen and she glanced down the hallway, kind of wishing he'd show up and say something that would possibly be nicer than the awkward silence that stretched as Mike stared at her, his eyes hungry and desperate, like he was dying from thirst and she was cool glass of water. Biting her lip she shifted away, knowing he was going to try and start a conversation.

"Did you get the waffle? Um, I thought you'd want something that was good... I'm not very good at making them fancy though, sorry."

She didn't look up, knowing better than to encourage him.

"Yeah... thanks," she shrugged.

In the end she'd eaten it because it was the only thing she could stomach and she was afraid she'd pass out if she didn't eat something solid. The last thing she'd wanted was to add another worry on top of the already exhausting fear. So she'd eaten it after it was long cold, savoring the familiar sweet syrup and chewy texture. But she wasn't allowing it to be a way for him to weasel back into her life.

“If you need anything, let me know,” he said, his tone hopeful. “You can text me if you want.”

“I won’t,” she snapped, shutting him down with two words. But she felt bad and sighed. “I mean... no thanks.”

The awkward silence was back as he tried to figure out what to say and she heard footsteps coming, looking up to see Will. He looked troubled but said nothing, glancing towards the door.

“Dustin said she knew who did it,” Lucas noted. “Did she tell you, El?”

“Um, yeah... I’m not sure if I’m allowed to say though. Since there’s legal stuff now. But it’s someone from—someone she knows.”

“Shit,” he whistled slowly. “That blows. But I hope they catch him.”

The door opened and three officers came out, looking serious before heading down the hallway without even glancing at the group of assembled students. Clearly they had bigger things to worry about, muttering to each other as they disappeared. El hurried into the room.

Max looked completely exhausted, eyes red, but also relieved. Dustin was sitting next to her, patting her hand and reassuring her everything would be okay.

And in a way it was.

After two more days in the hospital the doctors cleared Max to go home... which was the dorm. El skipped another week of classes, too afraid to leave her friend while she was still so fragile, but she and Dustin tag teamed it, changing Max’s bandages and bringing her food and entertainment while she healed. It was a slow process, but El was too relieved to care, keeping herself busy so she didn’t have to think about other things.

Like schoolwork and classes. And the impending Bright Students Gala, which meant a visit from Papa. And the fact that her grades had dropped due to her missing so many classes, which she was too exhausted to try and catch up with.



And Mike.

It was too difficult to think about him so she just didn't. But it was hard, because he was always there, hovering around the edges, being a good friend. He would stop by to check on Dustin, since they were roommates after all, which meant El couldn't even complain when he showed up at the door, avoiding his eyes and stepping aside to let him in without a word. Occasionally she would dare to glance at him, noticing the tired patience when their eyes met. He wasn't giving up but he was giving her space. Of course.

All the boys stopped by and visited Max, bringing her comic books and movies and Lucas even managed to torrent a 49er's game for her—since they were her favorite football team.

She had been afraid of losing her volleyball scholarship, but since it was offseason anyways her coach had allowed her to miss practices as long as she stayed over the summer and rebuilt her strength after she healed. El had never seen her friend so happy... she was almost *glowing*, despite the amount of stress she'd endured. Dustin hadn't left her side and they seemed more stable than ever. They'd even skyped his parents once, so they could meet her before summer.

The only worry was Billy.

He'd fled the state and their parents were unable to contact him either. Max had shrugged at the news, saying, "I don't think he'll come back. He made his point and he's smart enough not to try and kill me again anytime soon". But her friends kept her close anyways, keeping an eye out just in case. Max didn't let it dull her happiness.

El fed off of her friend's positivity, trying to keep herself from falling back into her negative slump. She had *needed* to be calm and collected and take care of everything... so she had. But now that it was getting back to normal the anxiety was rising. And now she didn't have a distraction, no one to see through the lie when she said she was okay, no one to encourage her when the stress piled too high. She was burying her head in the sand because it was easier than facing the truth.

The truth that she missed Mike.

She missed him more than she would ever admit which was the main reason it was so hard to even look at him when he showed up to their dorm room. Most of the time she'd slip out and wander up and down the halls until she caught sight of his familiar tall frame leaving. Occasionally he would try and start a conversation, but she shut it down almost every time with one word answers.

Why didn't he *get* it?

She had told him they were done. The brief... whatever-it-was was over and she was trying to focus back on her end goal: to get away from Papa forever. She hadn't factored Mike into that equation when she'd first started and now it was easier without him there at all. Sort of.

To be honest, she hadn't been expecting *just* how much she missed him... which was a whole fucking lot. Sometimes she would wake up in the middle of the night and expect him to be there, pressed close against her, his breath warm on the top of her head. Or in the caf, where making a waffle masterpiece wasn't as much fun without it's usual admirer. Studying, when she bothered to try and study anyways, was quieter, no inside jokes or breaks to watch an episode of Criminal Minds.

And no tutoring.

That had been her decision. How she could go back to the lab and face him? She couldn't, and even though she was breaking the promise and letting her grades slip she didn't care because it was easier than the fear of being with him. Of who would get hurt next because she was stupid enough to be happy.

Because she was absolutely terrified that it would be *him* next. That some massive tragedy would strike his life because he made her happy. That she would ruin his life because she had the audacity to *love* him.

But a huge part of her *ached* for him. The part of her that had thawed under his warm touch, that had let him in, had let him see the scars and the truth of the darkness that swallowed her like dark water. The part that made it impossible for her to stay away, to keep her hands

off him and smother the fire between them. The part that had led him to her bed and whispered, *I love you* as he drifted off to sleep.

The part of her that *loved* him.

The wall of denial she had built was breaking down and it made her panic. And she didn't want to worry Max about it, her friend had more important things to worry about than El's ridiculous love life.

*"If you want to talk you can always stop by my room."*

Will's words came back to her and even though that had been nearly two and a half weeks ago she figured the offer still stood. He was a solid, reliable person... kind of like Mike. But she wasn't ready to face him yet, face her emotions and how he made her feel and what she had said to him in a haze of fear-driven anger. That would be too much. So Will would have to do for now.

Her feet led her to the elevator, up the to the sixth floor where she now knew Will and Lucas lived. It was evening and Max was over at Dustin's having finally been allowed out of her room at last, so she didn't have to worry about her friend being alone.

It was time to try and deal with the giant mess she'd made, getting involved with Mike and then throwing him out within mere hours of confessing her feelings. He hadn't heard her but now it had been said she couldn't ignore it any longer and she needed to figure something out before the anxiety consumed her. There so many things she needed to do and this was just... blocking all of them. It had become a nuisance and she was ready to talk about it and make a decision.

A decision about whether or not she would be worth it to risk everything and love him. Because she wanted to... she just couldn't. Could she?

The thoughts were swirling around and around, making it impossible to think straight. It had been doing that for days, the main reason she'd been driven to actually seek help. Or at least someone to listen.

Her hand fisted and she took a deep breath before knocking on the door. Her anxiety lept up, telling her to run away and pretend just a

little longer that nothing was wrong. But she stood her ground as the knob shook and then turned, the door opening.

“El!” It was Lucas, grinning widely, eyes a bit glassy. “What. Is. *Up?*”

She wrinkled her nose. “Are you drunk?”

“Nah...” he looked down at the beer can in his hand. “Maybe just a little bit. It’s the weekend!”

“It’s Thursday.”

“Close enough! My classes got cancelled tomorrow,” he did a little shoulder shimmy of excitement and she rolled her eyes but smirked.

“Lucky. Hey, is Will here?”

Lucas burped. “Nah, he’s still at the art studio. What’d you need him for?”

El bit her lip and sighed. She wasn’t going to spill it to Lucas, especially when he was drunk. She would trust him to have her back in a fight or to help her have a good time at a bar, but he was a bit... harsh, when it came to emotional things.

“I just haven’t seen him in a bit. Kind of wanted to catch up and stuff,” she shrugged casually.

“D’you want me to text him? He’s just working on some project, I dunno,” Lucas nodded merrily, opening the door wider. “You can come in and wait if you want.”

“Um.... sure why not,” she sighed. “I would have texted him if I had his number...”

“Here.”

He snatched his phone and quickly sent a text. There was an almost immediate reply and Lucas nodded before holding his phone out to her.

“He said he’d be over in like twenty minutes—half an hour,

something 'bout watercolor drying?"

"That's... fine," she decided, taking the phone and copying Will's number into her own.

There was a semi-awkward pause as Lucas slurped down the rest of his beer and El settled into one of the desk chairs, fiddling with her phone. They'd never hung out without at least one of the others and it was a little weird. He finished his beer and the burped obscenely loud and long. El winced.

"Jesus, do you have *any* manners?"

"Not when I'm drunk," he grinned again, heading for the mini-fridge.

"I thought alcohol wasn't technically allowed in the dorms."

"It's just beer," he turned around, holding two. "Did you want one? Loosen up a little?"

She stared at the Pabst Blue Ribbon in his hand, narrowing her eyes. Beer wasn't her favorite but it wasn't the really shitty stuff and tense knot inside of her could use a little lubrication. Alcohol did that, made her speak her mind more, and if she was going to word vomit into Will's lap at the least she could make it easy. And he would be here soon anyways, she couldn't get out of control by then.

With a nod she let herself smile and roll her eyes, reaching out towards the cold can of beer, deciding to give in just this once.

"Yeah, okay."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

is that a cliffhanger? i don't even know ugh. anyways the pain gauntlet isn't over yet and next chapter is going to be really rough. it still needs some serious editing but i'm hoping to get it out before the end of the week. it's funny because whenever i guess when i'm going to post it i end up posting early. oh well.

so yeah. el misses mike like a ton but she might... it's

not going to be easy for her to be okay with that. i hope she doesn't do anything stupid. :C

thanks for all the well wishes. i'm a lot better now but i miss my car a lot. it's supposed to be really cold tomorrow and i'm dreading it sigh. i miss summer.

i hope you're all well and i love you very dearly. <3  
-g

## 18. All is in vain for us

### Notes for the Chapter:

long chapter alert and also

TRIGGER WARNING: suicidal ideation. i marked the parts with ampersands which is one of these thingies (&) the section that might be hard to read. if you think it will affect you negatively then please please PLEASE DO NOT READ IT. you can read before the & and after the & and still know what's going on but please for the love of all you hold dear... do NOT read the middle section if it will trigger something unhealthy in you.

i love you all and i want you to take care of yourselves and be careful. this chapter isn't going to be easy but it's so important for el and her journey just like it was for me. i promise i wouldn't have written it if i didn't think it was important to share but i am worried so just please, be so careful with yourselves. you deserve that.

anyways now that you're thoroughly terrified and spoiled up go ahead and read. sorry if that ruins anything for you but i have to be careful.

“—and then Dustin reached out from behind the stairs, like through the spaces, and grabbed his ankle and he *screamed*,” Lucas cackled, holding his stomach. “We were like fifteen but he sounded like a little girl. I still give him shit for it.”

El had to wipe tears of laughter from her eyes, setting down her second can of beer so she could try and catch her breath. She was buzzed, drinking on an empty stomach, the alcohol making everything funnier, and Lucas had been telling stories about being a kid, like Mike had back during their first sleepover. In fact most of the stories seemed to be about Mike, which she supposed *should* be awkward, but was just kind of nice.

She liked Mike. She liked hearing about him when he was younger. About how he was now. It made her feel warm, made her forget how she was supposed to feel when she thought about him.

“That was the last year we went trick-or-treating. We’d all hit our growth spurts and couldn’t pretend like we were thirteen anymore. Especially Mike, man, I swear it was like one day I could look him in the eye and the next thing I knew he was three feet taller. He had tendonitis an’ shit, his joints weren’t growing as fast and he hurt all the time.”

“That sounds shitty,” she sipped her beer.

“He didn’t really complain though, like one time I came over and he was just laying in his bed and crying in pain, but not like... aaaahhh!” Lucas wailed loudly, pretending to be a screaming baby, making El giggle again. “It was like he was just crying cause it hurt and he couldn’t not. His mom had to take him to the doctor to get painkillers so he could go to school.”

“Jesus Christ. I can’t imagine getting that tall that fast...”

“How tall are you?”

“Five three and a half.”

“I’m just happy I hit an even six foot,” he frowned. “Feet? Foot? Fuck, why is it called feet? Those are the things attached to my legs!”

“Hell if I know,” she snorted.

They were both sitting on his bottom bunk, backs against opposite ends, just chatting and waiting. El supposed it had been longer than half an hour but she didn’t mind too much that Will was taking so long. Actually, she’d kind of forgotten about Will. All she could really think about was... Mike.

“I always had to stand on my toes to kiss him,” she mused. “He’s like an entire foot taller than me, how is that fair?”

“Was he a good kisser?”



She gave him a grossed-out look. "Why do you care? Are you going to kiss him?"

"God, no. But he asked me for advice," Lucas shrugged. "Guess I want to know if it worked or not."

"He didn't ask for advice to kiss. He was already good at that. He asked you about—" she cut herself off, flushing pink and shaking her head. "About other stuff."

It probably wouldn't be a good idea to get into that. They'd been physical so quickly but it hadn't really felt like it was just a fuck-buddies kind of relationship. She'd made out with him because it felt nice and made her happy, distracting her from other things. And it wasn't just that making out felt good, because of course it did, but making out with *him* felt... more amazing than anything.

Because she loved him.

"Y'know I kind of thought he'd die a virgin but he seemed pretty excited about you," Lucas slurred a bit and she tensed as they reached dangerous territory. "S'too bad you guys called it quits before that."

"Yeah...?" She wasn't going to tell him the truth but didn't know how to reply to that. "Too bad."

"I think he really liked you, but I dunno. He just asked about sex stuff, were you guys like friends with benefits?"

"Sort of? I told him we couldn't date," she hiccuped as she finished her beer. "My dad doesn't like that shit. But Mike was okay with that so whatever I guess. Obviously we made out a lot."

"Do you miss him?"

It was so unexpected she almost dropped her empty can, blinking at him. He didn't look malicious or teasing, just genuinely curious and she swallowed down the "Yes!" she wanted to scream, instead looking down at the comforter and picking at a string.

"I guess. Being alone is harder after you've had someone," she

exhaled heavily. "But it's not like I've never been lonely before. I'll get over it."

"Sorry," he mumbled. "That sucks."

"It's whatever. Don't worry about it. It's not that big of a deal, we weren't that... it wasn't that deep." She had to force the words out but he was too drunk to notice her lie.

The reality crashed in again, just how much she missed Mike. Her chest ached, the space between her ribs feeling empty, and suddenly tears filled her eyes. She hiccuped and then she was crying softly, holding her face in her hands, pulling her legs back and tucking them underneath her as she tried to breathe and suck the tears back in.

"Woah, shit. Hey, uh, you okay?"

She took a deep breath before uncovering her face, trying to stifle the sorrow that was drowning her with no escape like she was a cat tied up in a bag and thrown into a river.

"Y-Yeah, sorry. I'm just tired and worried about Max and school and stuff and now I'm kind of drunk so it's just coming out," she wiped her face quickly. "Sorry, my emotions are kind of crazy."

"I noticed..." his voice wasn't harsh as usual and he scooted forward. "Do you want a hug?"

"No..."

"Oh come on, hugs make people happy. Come here."

He moved towards her, arms wide and then he was giving her a tight hug. His arms were more muscular than Mike's but he smelled like beer. She supposed she did too. He was warm and comforting, his grip solid and she relaxed, laying her head on his shoulder and accepting the drunken kindness she guessed was rare. Lucas wasn't the immediately friendly type and she was surprised he was being nice at all. But the kindness made her melt, made something inside of her yearn.

She just missed Mike so much.

Lucas pulled back after a bit, blinking warmly, but El kept her arms around him, staring into his eyes, which were glassy and dim. He held his head the same way Mike did, with a slight tilt like he was curious about everything. They had been friends their entire lives, it made sense that they had some of the same expressions and gestures.

And she missed him. She missed him so much it throbbed inside of her, whispering his name when she tried to sleep.

Her body moved without thinking, the only thought to break the loneliness, fuzzed by the two beers and the intense sadness. She just wanted to feel something else, something other than the anxiety and fear that came when she looked at Mike.

When she remembered that she missed him.

Her lips met Lucas's and she closed her eyes, imagining he was someone else. There was a grunt of surprise, but then he kissed her back, his hands on her waist, a little less gentle than she was used to. His lips were different too, more chapped, and the fantasy snapped as he suddenly pulled her into his lap with a hungry fervor that was unfamiliar and... unwelcome

Her eyes snapped open, his lips still pressed against hers and she saw the drunken haze in his half-lidded gaze.

*What are you doing?!* Her mind shrieked, the sleeping conscious waking from its semi-drunken stupor. *This isn't Mike. This isn't what you want. This is stupid, stop it before it goes too far.*

She wasn't so drunk she didn't have control of what she wanted and she realized her mistake, putting her hands up, onto his shoulders, to push him off before things got too heavy. This wasn't what she had wanted, or at least not what she had intended. Trying to stave off the loneliness and sadness by kissing one of his best friends? Not smart.

The door swung open and Lucas pulled back just as she pushed him away, his arms still wrapped around her waist, her legs in his lap and they both turned, El turning pink in embarrassment, figuring Will was finally back.

But it wasn't Will.

"El?"

Mike's eyes were huge as he looked between the two on the bed, taking in everything that she knew was so wrong. Her stomach was suddenly falling off a hundred foot cliff and she felt Lucas shove her off of him, falling back, freezing in place as the worst possible thing that could have happened... started happening.

"Mike!" Lucas was grinning again, trying to be nonchalant. "Hey, man, you want a beer?"

"What the *fuck*, Lucas?! Seriously?!"

"Woah, hey—"

Mike turned, eyes suddenly dark and fiery, and stormed out of the room without another word, the door slamming shut so hard the frame shuddered. Lucas jumped off the bed, leaving El without even looking back, running after his best friend, leaving the door ajar. He caught him a few feet from the doorway, looking confused, close enough that El could hear every word through the open door.

"Mike, wait, I... I'm sorry, man, I know you guys had a thing or whatever but she—"

"We didn't just have a *thing*, Lucas, we had *sex*! I said—" Mike's voice choked and he had to take a breath. "I told her I *loved* her! It wasn't just... she wasn't just some girl I screwed for fun like you do! I loved her!"

"Woah, *what*? You never told me that!"

"Yeah, well, I didn't really think you'd understand that kind of thing, okay?!"

Mike was *yelling*, completely irate, and El couldn't move, paralyzed by fear and shame and guilt, unsure of what to do. Lucas shuffled his feet.

"That's fair, I get it, I'm shit with emotions. But I didn't know. And

Mike, man... she kissed me first,” another shuffle. “I swear to God, she was getting all emotional and crying and I gave her a hug cause chicks like that and then she just kissed me.”

“You had your arms around her, Lucas! You think I’m too stupid to know what you wanted?!”

“Yeah, cause I’m drunk. And horny, honestly, it’s been like three months since I got any and... sorry, man, I mean I always thought she was kind of cute but you know I wouldn’t have... I mean I didn’t *want* her. She was yours and I wouldn’t mess with that, you know that! But she said you guys were just friends with benefits and that it was over and I didn’t know...” Lucas’s voice was hoarse. “I didn’t know you *loved* her. I wouldn’t have even hugged her. *I didn’t know.*”

There was a quiet pause. He’d sounded convincing and El knew that the two friends knew each other better than most people, that Mike would believe him. Lucas hadn’t been lying anyways. She had kissed him first.

A sigh. “How many beers did you have?”

“Uhhh... three. And a half?”

“You gave her a hug?”

“Yeah, we were talking about you and she started crying and I was like, ‘oh shit’ so I gave her a hug to try and like... I dunno man, girls need hugs when they cry. I didn’t move in til she kissed me, I swear.”

“You swear?” Mike sounded skeptical.

“God, fine, I *promise*. I’ll swear on anything you want, but I wouldn’t lie to you about this,” Lucas was drunk but not stupid. “I don’t lie about important shit and you know it. Even when I’m drunk.”

It was quiet again and El could hear her heart pounding in her ears, pulse racing. She wanted to bolt, to get as far away as possible from this situation but her entire body was ice, frozen in place as the conversation outside turned.

“I’m sorry, Mike. It didn’t mean anything to me I swear to God. She

was just there and she kissed me and—”

“You reacted like any drunk, horny guy would,” a heavy sigh. “I believe you. I don’t want to... but I do.”

A beat of silence and then a snuffle and shuddery breath. When Lucas spoke his voice was quieter and more gentle, sympathetic even as he slapped his friend’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Mike. That she... this is shit. I’m sorry.”

He was crying, El realized, and her heart shattered further. She moved to get up, to go out and say something to try and keep him from hurting more, to explain even, but she froze as they spoke again.

“Did you want to talk to her? She’s—”

“No. God, no. I can’t even *look* at her right now. I don’t want to see her... all I’ll be able to see is her with—No, Lucas. I can’t anymore,” Mike’s voice pitched up, full of frustration and hurt and tears. “I’ve waited around for her for weeks now... trying to give her space because her best friend got fucking stabbed and she blamed *herself* for it. Like she had called up someone to do it!” He laughed coldly, almost sounding hysterical. “And do you know *why* she blames herself? Because Max called while we were having sex and she ignored it.”

“Holy shit, are you serious?!” Lucas sounded astounded, like he didn’t know if he should be surprised that they had sex or that Max had been stabbed while it was happening. “Jesus, that’s some emotional baggage...”

“And I’ve been... waiting!” The anger was back in full force. “Waiting for someone who will never be able to actually give a shit about me. For someone who isn’t even capable of giving a shit about about me. I’m so fucking stupid. I’m the biggest fucking idiot.”

Every vein in her body was full of ice, the shards piercing her as she listened to his broken voice.

“I thought I could make her love me if I just... if I tried hard and was

patient.” A deliberate inhale, a decision being made. “I was wrong and I... I can't anymore. I'm done.”

His name choked in her throat, the truth lodging there as he spoke again, his voice harsher than she'd ever heard, each word like a knife being plunged into her chest.

“You can have her if you want. I don't care anymore.”

“Jesus, Mike, I *told* you, I never wanted her. I'm not going to fuck with you like that. You're my best friend.”

A sigh as he deflated. “I know, Lucas. I'm just pissed and you—“

“That's okay. I fucked up too. You have a good reason this time. But I'm not going to touch her ever again, okay? So don't worry about that. I'm done too...” Another pause. “Maybe you should go and blow off some steam? She's still here so...”

“Yeah... I need to just... I think I need to go for a drive or something,” another sigh and snuffle as he wiped the last of the tears from his face. “Get off this campus for a bit.”

“That's a good idea, man. Let me know if you need anything else, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Sorry again, Mike. I love you, man.”

An amused snort. “I believed you the first time. The ‘I love you’ is overkill.”

“Alright alright,” she could hear Lucas grinning. “I'll see you later. I need to go sober up.”

“Good idea.”

Mike was suddenly gone and El was still frozen, halfway to the door, trying to process what he'd said. But she didn't get the chance as the door swung open and Lucas was suddenly in front of her, looking at her like she was some kind of disgusting insect.

“Lucas—”

“You should... go,” he said slowly, shaking his head. “This was stupid.”

“It wasn’t like... Lucas, that didn’t meant anything to me either. I was just stupid and lonely and you were right there—” She needed someone to believe her. “I’m buzzed, I wasn’t thinking I was just being stupid and—”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“B-Because you and Mike said—”

“I don’t *care*, El. I told him you’re nothing to me and that was the truth. If you want to fix this shit you should tell this to him,” Lucas started throwing the empty beer cans into the trash, avoiding her eyes, obviously guilty but not wanting to take the blame. “I told him the truth. Maybe you should do the same.”

“But he *hates* me now,” she whispered.

“He’s angry. I think he has that right... I mean, you guys slept together and it meant something,” he shook his head. “You could have said that. I wouldn’t have been so stupid but I didn’t know you meant that much to him.”

“I-I—”

“I’m serious, El. Go home to Max and figure your shit out. I can’t help you.”

He was cold and she stepped back, realizing that he was right, he couldn’t help her. She’d made the stupid choice to kiss him and it was her fault that Mike thought—

Nausea bubbled up as the anxiety filled her, and she turned and grabbed the nearest trash can as she hurled, everything tasting like sour beer. She heaved, eyes watering, and puked once more, the last of the liquid leaving her stomach. Wiping her mouth she took a deep breath, closing her eyes and trying to breath in the oxygen that was suddenly gone.



“Okay, well that’s gross.”

“S-Sorry.”

The tears filled her eyes and then she was running from the room, not wanting him to see her cry, the familiar panic and fear making her shake as she thudded down the stairs, towards her room. She needed to scream or cry or *something* but she didn’t even know what. Her emotions were a churning sea and she was drowning in them, no lifeline to save her.

She collapsed on the floor in her room, in front of her desk, curling up into a ball and *sobbing*, so hard she thought her lungs would come out, her back pressed against the drawers. Everything hurt and her fingernails dug into her palm as the burgeoning reality of what had just happened fell onto her.

*Why did I kiss him? I don’t even like him like that. I just wanted to feel something, I wanted to feel like—*

Like how she felt when she kissed Mike. But it wasn’t an excuse, she had known he wasn’t Mike but had done it anyways, desperate to feel *anything*. The voice whispered into her ears, the familiar enemy, the dark part of her mind that consumed her.

*You hurt him. You betrayed him. You let him think he was nothing.*

It was just a guess at how he was feeling, but it was a good one. How would she have felt if she’d walked in on him kissing Max? In some bizarre universe where she was the one who was good and he was the one desperate enough for love to kiss her best friend. She’d be completely shattered.

&

*You were afraid he’d get hurt if you loved him and now you did this. You ruin everything you touch, even people you claim to love. Everything bad happens because you exist. You’re nothing but a stupid piece of shit, you should have disappeared years ago before you could fuck up anyone else’s life.*

“No,” she whimpered, not wanting to go back to that place. She had

been there once before and she closed her eyes, trying to keep out the voice of doubt and self-hatred. But it was too loud, shrieking in her ears as she pulled her knees to her chest, tears pouring down her face.

*You should have died the first time. Max would never have been stabbed. Mike wouldn't have known you, wouldn't be hurt so badly. Papa would finally be happy. Your existence is nothing but a burden on everyone around you, you piece of worthless garbage.*

The voice was stronger than it had been even when she was sixteen and hopeless, the thoughts filling her mind as she squeezed her eyes shut, trying to breathe, trying to find something to ground her and pull her back. It had always been Max before, her best friend had needed her to keep her away from the house of anger and broken glass. But now...

*She has Dustin and they actually love each other. They know how to love each other, unlike you. You ruined Mike by pretending you knew. You ruin everything you touch, why did you think this would be different? Max doesn't need you anymore. Mike doesn't want you anymore.*

*You have no one. You are nothing.*

"No."

*You should just die.*

"No... no."

*Give up, Jane. You'll never be good enough for anyone. You're always going to fuck up and hurt people and yourself. Give up. Just die. You know what to do now, so you won't wake up this time.*

"No!"

*You hate yourself anyways. What's the point? You'll never be anything, never do anything good, never be able to actually live and be happy. Just give up. You hate yourself, you hate yourself.*

The thoughts became her own, the same mantra of pain and self-hatred that came to her when the panic and the sadness came in.

*I hate myself, I hate myself, I hate myself, I hate myself, I hate myself, I hate myself —*

“No!”

She cried out, pushing herself away from the desk, away from where the razor blades she'd never been able to throw away were hidden in a drawer. It had been a stupid challenge to herself, to live with them so near but never reach from them. And they had stayed unopened, a symbol of her triumph, but were now a temptation she couldn't resist. Because despite not wanting to believe what the voice was saying... she did. Every word.

*Everyone hates you now too. Lucas will tell them what you did and you'll have no friends.*

Max was—

*She has her boyfriend now. Why would she pick your lying, two-timing, pathetic ass over the boy she loves?*

She was alone, more alone than she'd ever been and she cried harder, hiccupping painfully as her body froze over, onto the floor. Max wouldn't be coming to pick her up this time and she'd pushed Mike so far away even his kind patience couldn't handle it. The self-imposed isolation was freezing her out of everyone's lives and she felt like she was sinking into a dark abyss, the floor swallowing into the icy depths.

Before, when she'd disappointed Papa, she had felt the same feeling. After the ballet recital she'd laid on her floor for three days, the maids bringing her food and water but not saying anything like they'd been ordered. For three days she'd laid in the darkness, letting it fill her until all she could think about was how much she'd wanted to just die. So she'd started the planning, letting the emotions she couldn't control utterly consume her instead of trying to fight. Because fighting didn't work.

But now she had disappointed people she actually loved. People who thought she could be good. People who loved her too. She had hurt them... had let them get hurt. It was her fault, she had let it happen.

*I don't deserve to live.*

It was crushing down on her chest, her ribcage aching as the invisible force tried to squeeze the life out of her. She had never felt lower. Her best friend—her sister—was out of reach, in the arms of happiness and security. Her grades were dropping, too quickly to be fixed, and Papa was coming. He would know, giving her the cold, disappointed stare that would freeze her. And he would take her back to that house of shadows and ice.

But most of all she had hurt Mike. She had taken in all he had given her and then turned around and punished him for his kindness by preying on his insecurity. Allowing him in and then shutting him out and returning in the arms of someone else.

She'd told him without words that he was nothing to her and the sobs were back as she rolled towards the drawer, opening it, sitting up, pulling out the pack of razors hidden beneath the stack of folders. It would be easier, it would be better. There had been a future waiting for her when she was sixteen, someone depending on her, but now there was nothing.

She was *nothing*.

The metal square was in her fingers, the cold steel familiar and reassuring. It calmed her, though her heart was racing, and she sat up, back against the desk, rolling up her sleeve, her hand shaking as she tried to find the correct, usual angle.

She took a deep breath, closing her eyes and trying to calm. It would be done soon, everything would be better and calmer and quieter and easier. Everything would be okay. She could do this. Right?

Her eyes snapped open and she looked down, where the sharp metal flashed in the dim light, hovering an inch above the scars that puckered the skin on her wrist. The scars from last time, when she'd first felt the all consuming darkness. When there had been no hope, no light, no dream of tomorrow.

What would tomorrow be like if she didn't do this now? What would happen if she made it through this?

Max would come back and El would tell her everything that had happened. What she done and how she had hurt Mike. What would her she say?

Her friend's image appeared in front of her, shaking her head, telling her the same thing had their senior year, when she'd messed up a huge project for her and her assigned partner, causing them to get a failing grade. She had gone out to party with Max instead of finishing it, a bad choice, and her partner had been understandably pissed.

*"You fucked it up, Ellie," she sighed. "So now you have to fix it. You need to talk to him and tell him what happened. Tell him the truth. See what you can do to fix it." Her arms surrounded El, warm and so comforting and familiar. "I'll be here when you get back."*

El opened her eyes with a gasp. She *had* fixed it, talking to the teacher and writing an extra credit paper that had brought their grade back up. It hadn't been perfect, it hadn't been easy, but she had fixed it.

Her hand shook, the metal brushing her skin like a cool whisper.

Could she fix this? She had hurt him so badly, so much worse than she could have thought possible... how could he ever forgive her? How could she expect him to even allow her to apologize when he'd said the sight of her made him sick? How could she move on from hurting him?

What if he threw her out for good? Would she be able to move on from that?

This was the worst thing she had ever done. Falling at a ballet recital had been nothing. Failing PE had been nothing. Everything before this was nothing because it had only hurt herself. This time she had hurt someone else and guilt and the anger haunted her like a thousand poltergeists shrieking in her mind.

&

Why did it have to *hurt* so much?

*"But it's terrible and it hurts," she put her hand over her chest, where her*

heart was. *“Right here, like something is missing. I get so sad that I can’t even feel my heart anymore.”*

Her own words came back to her, sitting on cold linoleum in the hallway outside of a lab of dead kittens. And she heard his voice, gentle in her ear, his arms so warm as he rocked her.

*“That’s... part of it, El. Part of how you feel,” he had licked his lips nervously. “You have to feel the bad and the sad to know when it’s good. And when it’s good it’s... it’s amazing, right?” She nodded and he continued, feeling encouraged. “It’s better than feeling nothing, right?”*

*“Isn’t that what your mom told you? When you were little?” she asked.*

*“Yeah, she had that figured it out for sure and I’m glad she told me,” he smiled, rubbing her back gently. “So it’s okay to cry right now, El. It’s okay to feel that sadness and let it in and let it hurt because then when you’re happy you will know how much better it is in that moment. It’s okay,” he assured her, pressing a kiss to her temple. Then his expression became firm and he looked her straight in the eyes. “But you’re going to have to get up and go back in there if you don’t want to fail the lab.”*

And she had. She’d got back up on her feet and gone in and face what she hadn’t wanted to be real. The day had gone on and she’d moved forward. Because he had been right, remembering those moments of sadness made the happy ones even better. The bad didn’t cancel out the good but the good didn’t take away the bad. It was just life and you had to live with it and know it was something you couldn’t always control.

It was life and it was miserable and terrible and awful and so... *beautiful.*

It was the thing that hurt and was hard and made her feel like shit. But it wasn’t just the darkness, the depression and anxiety. There were moments that were so perfect, so beautiful that just remembering them made her heart ache.

Laying on a rooftop looking at the stars, snuggled beneath warm covers. Having a flour fight in the giant kitchen in the mansion while making cookies with a best friend. Music that flowed into her mind

and out through her feet. Classes about the brain and how it worked, how different factors affected it, how she could give her demons names and subdue them.

Whispering, “*I love you, Mike*” into a breath of peace and not feeling afraid.

The razor fell from her hand and then she was crying again, holding herself tightly, the voice gone as she realized that she wanted to *live*. Not for Max, not even for Mike, but for *herself*.

No, the depression wouldn’t ever go away, but she was tired of letting it make her a victim. She was done with that. It wouldn’t help, it wouldn’t make anything go away and if she had learned nothing from the first time, she knew now that it would just make the mess bigger. Dying wasn’t worth it. She wanted to live and feel everything and find the good and learn from the bad and never stop.

She wanted to live.

She’d barely taken a calm breath before the door opened, light flooding into the dark room as Max and Dustin bustled in, smiling and laughing warmly. Her tearstained eyes met her best friend’s as the light was flicked on, feeling surprised that they had come back so soon. But then her heart overflowed with gratitude and happiness.

“Ellie?”

“Max,” she croaked, a smile spreading across her face. “I love you.”

“I love you t—Are those *razors*?” Panic filled her friend’s face. “Eleven, please tell me it’s not—”

“No, I didn’t do it. I didn’t want to...” there was relief flooding in, making her smile so wide her face hurt. “I don’t want them anymore. I want to be happy and not feel guilty. I want to live, Maxie.”

“What?”

El was suddenly on her feet, wrapping her arms around her friend, trying not to squeeze the tender spot where she’d been stabbed but feeling so relieved and full of love and *happy*. She felt happy, happy

to hold her friend, happy to be loved, happy to just stand there and exist and breathe in oxygen.

No fear.

“Have you always had those? The razors?”

“Yeah,” El’s face was pressed against her shoulder, voice muffled. “It was supposed to be a challenge not to do it. I’ve always had them, but it was stupid, I’ll throw them away.”

“You don’t have to—Hey, babe?”

“Yeah?” Dustin was still in the doorway, unsure of what to do.

“Can you get rid of those? I don’t want them in the room.”

“Of course,” he affirmed as he snatched them off the floor and disappeared out of the door.

El started crying again, but this time it was just relief. She’d been so close to giving in again but she hadn’t and it was... it was almost cleansing, the way the need to slash and cut was just pouring out of her in the form of tears. She didn’t want it anymore. What she wanted was to hold her friend and remember every time they’d been happy together growing up and to keep making memories and to never let go and... to just feel loved.

She wanted to be loved.

A stronger set of arms surrounded them both and El got a whiff of Dustin’s usual body spray and taco smell as he squeezed both the girls in his strong arms. It was like being encased in giant, warm tortilla and she snuggled in further, feeling the tears leaking from her eyes.

This was what she wanted. Even though she knew the fear might come back, she wasn’t letting go this time.

After second Max loosened her grip, leaning back to look at her best friend in the face, eyes searching for any trace of the darkness El had just walked through for a second time. But there wasn’t any, the



revelation reigniting the spark within in her, warming her chest. It was the same warmth she had let others fill her with before, now created by her own will.

“Damn, Ellie, don’t scare me like that,” Max breathed, still clutching her. “I thought for a second—”

“I know, Max. I’m sorry. I promised not to scare you like that again but you know I’m shit at keeping promises...” She bit her lip, the familiar word bringing back the pain of her recent actions. “But I’m getting better. I’m going to keep this one, okay? No more scares.”

“Why did you—”

“It’s got something to with Mike, doesn’t it?” Dustin cut in and both of the girls turned to look at him, surprised. “Lucas texted me and Will and told us to keep an out for him. He said something bad had happened... did he do something to you?”

“No,” she shook her head frantically. “He wouldn’t.”

The shame and guilt welled back up as El shook her head, biting her lip so hard she tasted blood, not wanting to admit it. But she had fucked up and the only thing to do now as to try and fix it. Admittance was the first step... she was pretty sure one of the bullshit therapists had told her that but it sounded less bullshit now. Maybe some of them had been right.

“It was me... I did something, and I hurt him and—” She couldn’t help but cry as she heard his voice in her head again, saying he didn’t want her anymore. “It’s my fault and now I don’t know what to *do*.”

“What happened?” Max’s voice dropped to the usual soothing tone she used when El had panic attacks. “We can help. Tell us, Ellie.”

Dustin affirmed his girlfriend’s words with a nod and El knew it was time to be honest and be ashamed and tell the truth.

So the story spilled from her lips, the same lips that had started all of it. She didn’t skip on the details, telling them where her hazy, alcohol-addled brain had gone, why she had kissed Lucas and how quickly she’d realized it was wrong. Then what Mike had said with

justified anger after walking in at the worst moment. How she had ended up on the floor with her razors and what she had realized while staring down at her scarred wrist.

When she'd finished Max let out a long sigh, nodding.

"That's... that's messy, Ellie. I'm glad you didn't do it and I'm sorry I wasn't here—"

"It's not your fault, Maxie. Just like getting stabbed wasn't mine," she gave her a lopsided smile and squeezed her hand that she'd been holding. "I'm not worried about me right now I'm worried about Mike. I... I mean we weren't technically dating anymore—"

"Anymore?! You guys *were* dating?!" Max wanted to be excited but the situation was too serious.

El winced and then sighed, nodding.

"Less than twelve hours. I broke it off at the hospital in the morning..."

"So you weren't dating but you kind of were?" Dustin asked. "Like there was commitment?"

"I told him to get out of my life but you know he wasn't okay with that. He sent me that waffle, I don't know if he still thought we were together but I didn't... I was done. I told him that."

"Didn't you tell me he was the jealous type or something?" Max cut in.

"Yeah, and I gave him shit for it too. He was... he was like, confronting it, the fear that caused it because he wanted to get better. For me," she bit her lip, looking down. "And I just... threw it back in his face."

Her anxiety swarmed again as she thought about their conversation on the rooftop. How she'd led him past his line of fear by distracting him with kisses. She hadn't meant to use his fear against him but it made sense as to why he was so hurt.

“And with Lucas too,” Dustin sigh, shaking his head. “You couldn’t have kissed Will or something? Jesus, Mike and Lucas have been best friends forever but there’s always kind of been this... tension? Like they’re both good at things the other wants to be good at, Lucas wanted that academic thing and Mike wanted to be stronger. It was like they were always a little jealous of each other but that didn’t keep them from being friends.”

“Like rivals?” Max asked, eyebrow raised.

“Not *rivals*, just like... Mike was always the leader, the Dungeon Master, and he was really good at it but Lucas sometimes would take charge too. Sometimes their personalities just clashed and they would get in huge fights. Of course they do actually love each other—they’ve known each other forever—so they always would get it figured out in the end but...”

“I never noticed that,” El blinked.

“You wouldn’t have. It’s subtle. Sometimes Mike can touchy about things that Lucas thinks he knows more about or like... Lucas will want to share something Mike maybe wants to keep for himself.” He gave El a pointed look. “And Lucas will brag or get petty if he’s better at something than Mike, like he was to prove something. They’re never malicious it’s just... how it’s always been.”

She nodded, able to think of a few times she’d noticed that sort of behavior between the two, that waffle in the caf, the drinking at the bar where Lucas had told Mike what to do, reveling in his birthday superiority. Definitely subtle but there. How could she have been so stupid?

“What...” she turned to Dustin, knowing he was her best bet. “What do I do now? I want to fix this. I want to apologize because... he deserves that. I fucked up big time but I didn’t... I didn’t want it to end this way.”

“It kind of depends on how close you were I gue—”

“He told me he loved me,” she blurted.

Max gasped, suddenly excited. "Oh my god, when?! Ellie!"

"It was... the night you were stabbed, Max..." she stared down at her hands in her lap. "It's why I blamed myself. I was so happy and then you had to pay the price..."

"But it was Billy."

"I know that now."

"Did you say it back?" Max asked eagerly but El dodged the question and looked back at Dustin, eyes pleading.

"Do you think he'll even talk to me?"

Dustin looked thoughtful and she felt a flash of gratitude for her best friend's loyal, thoughtful, humble boyfriend. He had no reason to be helping her since he should be on Mike's 'side', but she got the feeling he thought it would help his friend. Which was all she wanted now, to try and fix what she'd broken. Who she'd broken.

With a reassuring nod he leaned forward, letting out a sigh and trying to be optimistic.

"If he loves you... I think you have shot, El. But it's... I can't make any promises that any advice I give will work."

"I know," she said, resolute. "But I have to try. I have to be able to say I tried."

He set his mouth into a grim line but nodded again.

"Alright. Here's what might help..."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

i'm sorry. i know it's not anything good yet but when is life easy? when is it uncomplicated? when do we not make mistakes? i told you... gauntlet of pain. but we're on the other side of the worst of it.... sort of. next chapter is also going to be rough but not as bad as this one in the mental sense.

all of this is relevant. i'm not trying to romanticize or bank on suicide and mental illness but they are such core part of this story. it's el's journey to self-acceptance which doesn't... it doesn't make depression go away but it helps. it's been six years since i reached the point el did in this chapter and i'm not cured but i can say i'm better than i was.

i don't want to talk about my journey yet, not until this one is over. but you guys, if any of you feel like this or have felt like this, you are not alone. i'm always willing to talk the best way i can but there are hotlines and messaging services that you can use if you need someone.

here are some resources if you need them. but please, don't ever hurt yourself. you are worth so much MORE than that.

1-800-273-8255

<http://www.suicide.org/suicide-hotlines.html>

<http://ibpf.org/resource/list-international-suicide-hotlines>

anyways sorry this is so heavy but it's such a serious topic and i want it to be taken seriously. this isn't a joke to me or just a way to add drama to a story. it's real and important and valid.

on that note i'm going to try and get the next couple chapters written up. we're in the home stretch, i'm thinking 4-5 more and an epilogue but i'm scared i won't meet my deadline aaahh.

to say it one last time, I LOVE YOU ALL SO MUCH.  
truly, from the bottom of my heart.

-g

## 19. God knows I'm not dying but I bleed now

### Notes for the Chapter:

sorry again about last chapter being so heavy. this one isn't happier but it's the beginning of the end and a necessary evil. happiness is so close, guys, just hang in a little longer!

i'm thinking two more chapters and an epilogue, but it may turn into three chapters. a lot of shit happens and i have it mapped out but sometimes it takes longer to put it into a story so idk. but that's my estimate.

uh, yeah. quick update cause i am so motivated to finish this. but i have two huge midterms this week and a quiz on monday and yeah college sucks. :)

It was May, the end weeks of April all blurring together. There had been the bright spots, Max getting out of the hospital, El's new mindset, catching up with her classes and feeling accomplished. Well, almost all of her classes.

It had been a week and half since she'd kissed Lucas and ruined everything. As much as it was killing her, she left Mike alone. Dustin said he'd need some time to cool off and rationalize everything that had happened and she believed him. Her apology would be useless if he was still too angry to even listen to her. And he had been furious.

Sometimes she could still hear his voice, saying *"You can have her if you want. I don't care anymore"* so coldly it made her shiver.

She hadn't seen him since and part of her was grateful because she didn't know how she would react, but that undeniable ache inside of her that had caused her to make such a stupid decision was still there. The way her heart missed him and ached for him, something she'd never felt before. Or at least not so intensely.

Currently she was on her way to the caf for breakfast, holding her

Abnormal Psychology book in one hand and trying to study the notes for the test that was later that day in the other. Her professor in that class had been the most understanding when she'd explained why she'd been absent for three weeks straight. Dr. Swift had allowed her to earn back her attendance grade with a couple of case study analyses, which El had enjoyed. If only all her classes could be that amazing.

Computer Apps had been easy to catch up on, since she'd only missed one test and assignments were due by the week. College Writing had been a bit harder, but most of her grade relied on her research paper which she was almost done with. Ethics and Sociology required some extra credit finagling, but she'd managed to get back into the good graces of her professors and felt confident she would pass both classes, maybe not with As, but with high Bs.

The problem was A&P. Without the tutoring her grades had plummeted and she'd missed three labs, dropping her down to an actual F. Dr. McNeill had been sympathetic but firm, saying that she'd just missed too much and would have to retake it next semester.

The Bs would be easier to explain to Papa... the F, not so much.

She hadn't talked to him since before Max's assault, and she hadn't had a reason to. If anything he would be upset Max hadn't been killed, one of the annoyances in his life finally gone. He did send her the occasional email to remind her of the upcoming formal. The Bright Students Gala. She'd received her invitation months ago and it wasn't something they really revoked which was good because explaining that to Papa would be the worst. But she didn't have a date and she didn't have a dress and she had zero motivation to find either even though it was in a few weeks.

"Oof!"

The book and the notes went flying and she fell back onto her butt, so immersed in studying and thinking she hadn't seen the person standing directly in front of her. With a grumble she looked up, just as a familiar, pale hand reached down to help her, her eyes following the lanky arm up to the pretty, freckled face she'd missed so much.

Their eyes met and Mike realized it was her. Her heart leapt towards him but then his face twisted and he looked away, something dark and angry filling his expression. Was it... hatred?

Her heart clenched and she looked down, grabbing her book and pretending like she didn't see him pull his hand away. Pretending like seeing him pull his kindness and acceptance away totally didn't shatter her further. She was on her knees, grabbing her scattered study guide pages, but when she glanced up he was still standing there, like he was frozen.

"Um... s-sorry," she stuttered. "For running into you."

"Not the first time."

He meant when they had first met at the bookstore. When she had snapped at him for trying to sit in that stupid chair, and he'd looked so confused and handsome before he'd given her that curious stare and asked about her name. And he'd called her El for the first time, face red and embarrassed.

"I never apologized for that one so um... sorry?" she said weakly as she stood, brushing the dirt off the long, jean skirt she was wearing.

His eyes which had softened for just a second turned to ice again and he shook his head.

"Yeah, me too."

He turned, his backpack almost smacking her and then strode off in the opposite direction. Her heart cracked further as she watched him go, his dark mop of hair ruffling in the breeze, long legs taking him far away from where she wanted him to be.

Tears filled her eyes as she realized just how mad he was. She'd been hoping Dustin had maybe overestimated how upset he was... but he lived with him and clearly he'd been right. More than anything she wanted to apologize but it was obvious he wouldn't be listening to her any time soon.

Brushing the tears away she turned away from the caf, deciding she wasn't hungry any more.



&&

“What about that dress in the back of your closet? The pink one?” Max asked, digging through her own closet.

“It doesn’t have sleeves, Max. And you can see my ankles...”

“Your ankles aren’t even that scarred, no one will be looking that closely. And... what if you wore gloves or something?”

El had been trying to find a dress, but everything was short and tight or had large cut-outs in the stomach and she’d been struggling to find something Papa would approve of that was formal enough and also not too revealing. That she could afford, of course, because damn it all if she was going to spend more of *his* money.

But she hadn’t thought of gloves.

“Gloves?”

“Yeah, like, white ones that go up really high, like princesses wear? You could do like, white pearls and one of those bun things—”

“A chignon?”

“Uh, yeah. It would go with the dress. You’d look classy.”

“When did you start caring about style?” El said smugly.

“Oh shut up, you’re the one who had all those fashion magazines in the bathroom at your house. What else was I supposed to read while taking a dump?”

“Gross!”

They laughed as El pulled out the dress from its hiding place in the back of her closet. Max wasn’t wrong and El nodded, trying to think of where she could get gloves. Dustin had an in with the Theater

majors, maybe she could borrow some from the costume closet?

The Gala was in three days and she'd been putting it off because the anxiety that filled her every time she thought about it almost made her panic. She still didn't have a date, but she had kind of given up on that. Papa would be annoyed but at this point... she didn't care. Her A&P grade was too low to please him anyways and she knew she was screwed. But until she saw him she was trying to just keep living and not let it distract her.

"—think Dustin could get you some from the costume room. Ellie? Are you listening?"

"Yeah, sorry, just..." she trailed off, twirling a strand of hair absentmindedly.

"Thinking about the Royal Prick again?" That's what Max called Papa. "Don't worry, Eleven. It's going to be fine. He can't pull you out of college. You're an adult. And you were taking care of me after I got fucking *stabbed*. He can't be that heartless."

But he could be. El always had the feeling he'd viewed her more as property than a human being. An investment, to make profit on just like all the ones who came before her. It was why she wasn't hardly allowed to have friends. To date. She wasn't something he liked to share.

"Yeah..."

The door to their room almost hit the wall as Dustin busted in, panting heavily and nearly collapsing onto the floor. Max jumped and ran to him, looking worried.

"Oh my god, babe, are you okay?!"

"I'm..." he wheezed. "—fine. Had to tell.... El."

"Tell me what?" She came up next to him, looking equally concerned. "Did you run all the way here? Isn't that dangerous for you?"

"Ha," he panted. "So glad you... appreciate my help."

“Help with what?” Her eyes widened. “Wait, does it... is it about Mike? Is he okay?”

“Today,” he gasped, more dramatically. “You can apologize today.”

Max, who definitely had been concerned, sat back and rolled her eyes as he continued to wheeze dramatically, tiring of his theatrics. Of course he wasn’t actually hurt or dying, just out of shape.

“You didn’t have to give me a heart attack to come and tell us that,” she complained.

“Sorry, Max,” he sat up and gave her a quick apology kiss. “But he’s going to the lab to grab something and I thought...” He turned to El. “He’s been in a good mood today. And you’ll be in a quiet place alone. I think it’s your best shot.”

“It’s been like a month, he can’t stay mad forever, right?” Max asked, looking hopeful.

“He’s held grudges over stupid things before. This one isn’t stupid and he cared a lot,” he shrugged. “But he’s had time to think it over and he isn’t as... grouchy? Maybe he’s over it, I can’t quite tell and I haven’t asked.”

El stood, walking over to her desk and grabbing her phone, shoving it into her hoodie pocket. It was getting too warm for long sleeves but she still had them on. Her flip flops were on her feet and then she was moving out the door, wanting to get to the lab as soon as possible. To see Mike.

“Thanks!” she called out behind her.

She had been waiting for this day for weeks. Months, it felt like. She’d tried to talk to Mike once, when she’d run into him outside of his dorm room, but he’d just shook his head and walked away. He avoided her completely after that and she had let him, knowing pushing her into his life wouldn’t help. She’d asked Dustin for his help again and he’d told her to be patient. Which she sucked at.

*“I’ll wait, as long as it takes, until you can love me.”*

Mike's words had given her the strength to wait. He always kept his promises and it was time she started keeping hers. Starting with waiting and moving onto apologizing. It's what he would do... it's what he did.

Her feet whisked her across the campus and she almost ran to the science building, going down the familiar steps, her heart racing. If he was in a good mood today maybe he would listen. Maybe he wouldn't look at her with that anger and sadness and hurt that caused the shadows under his eyes.

Maybe she would finally tell him that she loved him.

She shivered at the thought, something still making her apprehensive. Why was it so hard for her to admit? She wasn't afraid something bad would happen if she loved him but some other, newer fear had risen. A fear that it wouldn't be enough. That he wouldn't care. That he didn't want her anymore.

But he had told her he loved her. Had promised to love her no matter what, his warm arms wrapped around her bare skin as his tears dripped onto her shoulder. She shivered at the memory, missing his touch even more.

The light in the lab was on and she was sure her heart was about to burst out of her chest and ricochet around the room it was beating so fast. Her hand was on the knob and she twisted it, walking in and looking around the massive classroom.

He was standing there, at the desk at the front, staring down a stack of papers with a frown, but looked up at the sound of the door. His eyes narrowed but filled with confusion instead of revulsion, the pen dropping from his grip.

"El?"

"Um, hi, Mike," she waved awkwardly.

"Why are you here?" He frowned. "How did you even know I was here?"

"I... it's... I came to say I'm sorry."

He was so far away and he frowned again, crossing his arms as she slowly stepped towards him, wanting him to see her face and know she was being honest.

“Okay...” he didn’t sound impressed. “Sorry about kissing one of my best friends, I’m assuming?”

“Well yeah but—”

“I don’t really want to hear it, El. Honestly. I think it kind of speaks for itself,” he turned away, reaching for the stack of tests.

“Mike, please, I didn’t just... I know I fucked up. It was my fault and I shouldn’t have done that but I was—”

“You were what? You wanted to prove to me that I was nothing? That I didn’t matter to you? What could you *possibly* have to say that would make me think what you did was okay?” He snarled, the anger back with a vengeance.

She shrunk back, suddenly unsure, but shook her head. He was saying cruel things, thing that clearly had been festering inside, but he was missing the point.

“I’m not trying to get you to be okay with it. I know it wasn’t okay, that’s the whole point of the apology.”

“Then what, you want me to just forgive you?”

“No, I just *want you to hear me out!*” she yelled, face pink and flustered. “I’ve been waiting for weeks to try and apologize because I... I hurt you and I have never regretted anything more in my entire life.”

“Not even sleeping with me?” He wasn’t having it. “I believe you referred to that entire night as ‘a huge mistake’ back at the hospital.”

“I was losing my mind then!” That wasn’t fair and she looked at him in disbelief. “I thought Max was going to die and that it was all my fault... I know I was wrong, okay? What I said... it wasn’t right and I didn’t mean it, and I know you couldn’t tell but I never meant any of what I said then. I was scared and mean. I’m sorry about that too. All

of it. All of... this," she made a vague gesture between the two of them. "I hurt you then and I hurt you again even worse and I can't go back and fix it but I want you to know that kiss you saw... it didn't *mean* anything to me."

His eyes were like brick walls and she felt tears prick her own, desperation bubbling over. Why wouldn't he believe her? She was saying she was sorry. She was admitting she fucked up, that it was a mistake. Couldn't he tell how much she regretted it?

"Then why did you kiss him in the first place? Your hands were—" he looked down, jaw clenched. "You were *on* him, El. That's not just a kiss."

"He pulled me into his lap after I kissed him. I was about to push him away, okay? I didn't like it and I knew it was stupid and I was going to..." she shook her head, knowing that it didn't matter what she had meant to do. "But you walked in right then and it was like I couldn't breathe and I just froze. But I never wanted him... not like I wanted you."

Her words were sweet and honest but they bounced off of his cold exterior.

"You didn't answer the question," he challenged, voice icy. "Why did you kiss him?"

"Because I *missed* you," her voice broke. "I missed you and I was mad at myself for missing you and I didn't want to see you because it made all the dark, twisty stuff inside of me even... twistier! I went to talk to Will because... I've kind of talked to him about it before and he offered and I wanted to figure out what to do. Because I missed you so much my fucking teeth hurt but I felt so guilty about what happened to Max. And Lucas was there and offered me a beer and I just wanted to relax—"

He snorted cynically and she dug her fingernails into her palm.

"We were waiting for Will. I had two beers on an empty stomach and he was drunk and it was just like... we were talking about *you*, Mike," her brow was furrowed in pain. "He was telling me stories

about when you guys were kids and then he asked if I missed you and I lied and said no but I started crying because... because I *did* miss you. And he hugged me and it was nice and I wanted him to be you so *badly* that I just..." She paused to take a deep breath. "I kissed him. And it took me like two seconds to realize he wasn't you and I didn't want it. I was going to push him away right when you walked in." She was crying, the tears silent but streaming down her cheeks. "And you looked like I had just murdered everyone you'd ever loved and I knew I'd made the worst mistake. That's what it was, Mike. A mistake."

She didn't tell him about what happened afterwards. What she had almost done alone in her room. Because that wasn't about him, that had been her own mind taking the bad and making it worse. She hadn't come here to guilt him into taking her back or threatening him with her own mental state. That wouldn't be fair and she didn't want him just to love her because he was afraid she would... hurt herself.

"I'm sorry, Mike, I'm so sorry. I know you were afraid I would find someone else—of losing me—and then I kissed one of your best friends and it was so *stupid* and I have no excuse. But I want you to know I am so sorry I hurt you. I'm so, so, so sorry."

It was quiet. She'd let out a lot of word vomit, but it had been the truth and she searched his face, trying to find the familiar understanding and kindness there. The one she craved, the one she missed. He blinked.

"You know..." he shook his head and her heart sunk. "I want to believe you. But I just don't know if I can."

"Mike," she gasped, panic gripping her. "Mike, please—"

"Don't, El. Just don't," he shook his head again, gathering the papers. "You said a lot of things and I was stupid enough to believe them but now I just can't. It hurts too much."

"But I'm telling the truth," she whispered as tears filled her eyes.

He wouldn't look at her, wouldn't meet her pitiful stare, shoving the tests into his bag angrily, like he just wanted to get away from her

again. Time slowed and everything felt wrong. She had thought he would believe her but he didn't and she couldn't understand—

“You said parts of you *loved* me. What parts, huh? The ones that were all over Lucas?” He spat.

He used that word, the one she hadn't been able to say to him even while nestled safely into his arms. The one she had finally accepted. The one that now vibrated her to her very core, the one that made her hurt so bad she couldn't breathe when she thought of him. The one she was afraid of again now.

“You said you loved me too,” she said weakly, knowing it wasn't going well but not wanting to give up.

“Yeah, clearly I was *delusional*. Wasn't that the word you used?”

He walked past her towards the door, not bothering to hardly acknowledge she was standing there, like he wanted to pretend the entire conversation wasn't happening.

“You p-promised,” she whimpered. It was pitiful and desperate and she knew it. But the words he'd said with such conviction during their night together were now the ones she clung to. “You promised to always love me. Even when I didn't deserve it.”

He froze in the doorway.

“A-And that you would w-wait until I could love you back. That you would always be there when I needed you.” She sobbed, the tears no longer silent. “I *need* you, Mike. I miss you so much I can't breathe sometimes.”

His shoulders slumped a bit and he turned to her, looking tired and almost... hopeful?

“Why?”

“What?” Her brow furrowed in confusion.

“*Why*? Why do you miss me? You keep saying that but you didn't act like you missed me and now...” his hands tangled into his hair,



tugging in frustration, clearly torn. “Now I don’t know what to believe. Why do you even care now if you said I was nothing to you before?”

*Because I love you,* her mind replied.

But the words were stuck, not because she was afraid of them but she was afraid it might not be enough now. That he wouldn’t believe her even if she said it. That it would all go to waste.

The tiny bit of hope dimmed away as her silence stretched, his face despondent. Her mouth opened but no sound came out and the anger returned to his expression as he shook his head, her inability to find an explanation—or to even try—saying everything.

“You’re just saying shit, Eleven. And I don’t want to hear it.”

He didn’t call her El. Her eyes widened.

“No, Mike, I’m not, please just—I’m not lying but I don’t know if—”

“*Stop.* Just stop,” he was shaking his head. “Whatever you miss it’s—” his eyes broke and the anger was replaced by the pain he’d been hiding. “It’s gone now. I can’t bring it back. I can’t keep those promises anymore,” his voice wavered and she saw him break down, saw how vulnerable his face was as she watched him do the one thing he never did. Break a promise. His voice was thick with regret as he spoke again. “I’m sorry.”

The last thing she had expected to hear was an apology and it stunned her. But then her hand reached out and she closed the space between them, her fingers on his cheekbone as she stood up on her tiptoes, desperate to try one last time to get him to believe her. Maybe her actions would speak louder than her words.

He didn’t pull back as their lips met, stooping down as she held his face in her hands and kissed him with all of the love and passion that was pouring out of her breaking heart. His shoulders slumped and he relaxed against her, his fingers brushing her wet cheek as something unspoken passed between them.

It was the kiss that should have happened weeks ago, the one she’d

drunkenly, *stupidly*, given to someone else. It lasted forever and only a moment at the same time and then he was pulling back and she let him go, let her hands drop, stepping back and staring up at the constellations on his face.

“El...” he gasped, looking confused and hurt and unsure.

“I’m not lying,” she whispered, her hazel-brown eyes wide and honest as they met his ebony ones. “I promise.”

He took two steps back, looking down, like he was trying to make sense of everything that had just happened. But he didn’t move towards her, didn’t smile, and she realized it hadn’t been enough.

“I-I need... I need to go. I need to think,” murmured, more to himself than her. “I can’t handle this right now.”

She blinked and he was gone, his footsteps echoing down the hallway as he moved farther and farther away from her. All of the oxygen left the room and she felt her legs crumble beneath her as a sob choked her throat.

Her heart was splitting in two, the patchwork she’d managed to put back together shredded by his words and actions. Dustin had been wrong. Mike would never forgive her. She’d pushed him away too many times, hurt him too many times, been wrong too many times. The sobs shook her and it took her several minutes to compose herself enough to walk back across campus to her dorm, where Max was waiting.

“How did it—” Max cut herself off when she saw her best friend’s face, opening her arms. “Oh, Ellie. I’m sorry.”

“He hates me,” she whimpered. “He doesn’t love me anymore. I messed up the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Shhhh, it’ll be okay.”

“He hates me. He *hates* me. I hate me, Max.”

“No no no, shhh,” her hands were warm. “I think maybe he just needs some more time. You had a lot to say.”

El wanted to tell her what had happened but she was crying too hard. He'd said that he didn't love her anymore and she believed him. But he'd looked so broken, she didn't know what to believe. The guilt was back, lapping at her like water on a shoreline, slowly eroding her away to nothing.

Max held her for the rest of the night, helping like she always did. They snuggled together on the bottom bunk and watched a show Max liked called Brooklyn Nine-Nine, the humor distracting her enough that eventually she started to tire, the emotions having drained her.

Max was half-asleep too, her red hair spread everywhere, the strands tickling El in a comforting way as she turned and rested her head on her best friend's shoulder. Everything hurt, her entire chest ached and her mind throbbed as it replayed the conversation over and over in the classroom, trying analyze everything, every word, every breath, every tear that had fallen.

Mike's face, twisted with outrage and... hate?—haunted her. His eyes so full of hurt and pain, the same pain she'd seen reflected in her mirror over the years. Of craving love and being rejected. Of wanting something you realized was impossible.

*How could I have done that to him when I said I loved him?*

Maybe she really wasn't capable. Maybe she was just kidding herself, making herself think that she loved him when she didn't even know what it felt like. But it hurt so much she was sure she would die, crying quietly into Max's shirt, closing her eyes and surrendering to the darkness that consumed her.

She barely slept.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

mike isn't perfect. i know i kind of write him perfect because he's pretty much my favorite fictional character ever, but he's not. he has a temper and jealousy issues and idk HE ISN'T PERFECT OKAY.

but el is kind of screwed so i hope he figures himself

out. when you mess up all you can do is apologize.

uhhhhh there isn't a whole lot to say lol but leave me  
a comment about how much you hate me and i'll  
love you forever! <3

-g

## 20. The bittersweet between my teeth

### Notes for the Chapter:

okay so i know how many chapters and it's 21 but there's gonna be an epilogue so yeah.

i listened to "young blood" by the naked and famous and wow is it mike and el's song in this story lol. now that i'm towards the end i can't stop writing and it's good but also bad.

so yeah this is second to last chapter. but i don't have the next one written so idk if i'll be bale to update as quickly but i'll try and do what i can.

i think i might just make the deadline. eleven days guys!! aaahhh i'm so ready but i'm not.

It was Saturday evening and El hadn't been out of bed since Friday afternoon, after her last class of the week. Max had been dragging her out of bed, putting out clothes, making sure she'd eaten and sending her off to her classes. But the depression was a cloud and she was struggling to just... live. Again.

The depression, despite her not allowing it to make her into a pitiful victim, wasn't gone. Her new, optimistic take on life wasn't suddenly making it go away and the black hole of sadness reopened in her chest, making it hard to think and sleep and eat.

She still missed him, but though the ache didn't fade, it was less noticeable now. His reaction to her apology had made the possibility of them being over for good a real possibility in her mind and she supposed she was numbing herself in case he really did ice her out forever.

Dustin was out now, the tip he'd given her about Mike's location having exposed him as the spy. Mike hadn't been mad at him, but didn't talk to him about it anymore and she felt bad for potentially having harmed their friendship. Another thing to be guilty about.

“Ellie, you have to take a shower.”

“No.” She rolled over and buried herself further under her covers. “I’m not moving ever again.”

“The gala-thingie is in... four hours? You have the gloves and the dress. You need to shower and get ready.”

“I don’t want to go.”

A sigh. “It’ll be worse if you don’t. He’ll come and find you.”

“I hate him.”

“I know, I do too. Come on.”

The blankets were thrown off the mattress and El squinted up at Max, glaring and pouting angrily at her best friend. But she was right, of course. If she didn’t go Papa would find her and the last thing she needed was him coming up to their room. Anxiety, the beehive kind, filled her chest and she groaned loudly.

“He’s going to make me leave. I’ll have to go back.”

“You don’t know that, El. He doesn’t know about me getting stabbed or anything.”

“He won’t care. You know he hates you.”

She sat up slowly, sighing as Max shoved her shower caddy and robe into her hands. It was the usual depression schedule and she was grateful but grouchy. Nothing about today could be good.

“Take a shower, you smell worse than my boyfriend.”

“You never make him take a shower.”

“Uh, yeah I do,” Max pushed her towards the door. “But I don’t think you’ll want me to shower with you so I won’t make the same offer I do to him.”

El grimaced as Max laughed but she wandered down the hall to the

showers and picked her usual favorite stall. Her peach shampoo was almost gone and she realized she'd need to buy more soon... did they still have the same scent? She'd lost her job at the smoothie counter, having quickly resigned after Max got out of the hospital, knowing she'd be too busy to show up.

So now she had no job, no boyfriend, no money, and no way to please the one person in her life who held the power. She clenched her loofah as she scrubbed at her skin, hating that she had to rely on him so much for everything. There was just no other option, she didn't have any athletic skills like Max to get a scholarship and she was too well off for grants. She hadn't even bothered to check because it was hopeless.

And she had failed.

Everything seemed so gloomy and she supposed she was lucky she had decided she loved life because it was completely shit now. She did the usual shower routine like a zombie, shaving and exfoliating and and dreading the evening.

*I don't want to go to this. He's going to ask why I don't have a date. And I have to tell him I failed my class. And my GPA dropped. I ruined everything.*

She wrapped her hair up into her towel, pulling her robe on and heading back to her room.

*He's going to fucking murder me.*

The next three hours passed in a blur as she half-heartedly put on her makeup, keeping it lighter and brightening her eyes, trying to cover the dark circles under her eyes. Max flitted around, helping with her hair and motivating her every time she stopped. It had to be done.

"You look so good, holy shit," Max gasped as El twirled a bit.

Her hair was up, tied into a neat bun near the base of her neck, her blush-pink dress cinching in her small waist and then going into a full, tulle skirt. The sweetheart neckline accentuated her collarbones which were one of her best features, the gloves going up to the

middle of her upper arm, covering the scars. Max had been right, no one would be looking closely enough to see the ones on her lower legs and she'd picked of a pair of wedges that had ribbons that tied up the legs, her string of pearls and the ensemble giving her a 50s prom queen slash ballerina vibe.

She looked *hella* good.

"It's alright, I guess," she shrugged.

Max rolled her eyes, checking the time and then handed her a sparkly clutch which contained her invitation, her cellphone, and the pink lipbalm. Only the essentials.

"If you need *anything*, you can call me. Or Dustin, he said he'd be willing to stop by if he needs to. So if the twatwaffle threatens you or something we'll be there ASAP, okay?"

"Okay," El nodded numbly.

"I'm serious, if that piece of dumpster trash tries *anything*, I'll—"

"I know, Maxie. I promise to call you if I need you."

"Good."

The formal event was being held in the art museum on campus, with food and music and all of the schmoozing you could stand. It was beautifully decorated and El looked around at the swathes of glimmering fabric that covered the walls, making the artwork stand out. A different string quartet played on each level, managing to play in sync and fill the entire building with music as the tuxedo-clad caterers holding silver trays of food and drinks, everyone looking glamorous.

She felt out of place, the social anxiety making her want to turn around and walk out before everyone around her could see how obvious it was that she didn't belong there. Why was she here? She shouldn't have come there was no one—

"El?"



She turned and blinked. It was Will, wearing something other a flannel shirt for once, dressed up in a nice button up and slacks. He looked surprised to see her and she felt equally surprised, not because she didn't think he was smart enough to be invited but because she just hadn't expected to see him.

"Oh, hey, Will. I didn't know you'd be here."

"Yeah, this the first time I've showed up. I helped plan it this year and some of my art is on display so I figured I should actually come," he swallowed. "You look really nice."

"Oh... thanks," she looked down at herself. "I had to come too. Not optional."

"Someone important you have to meet?" He guessed.

"Sort of. My dad—adopted dad—he's here and I have to see him and tell him I've failed A&P and my GPA has dropped and I'm a huge failure basically all of the shit I've been hiding from him is going to hit the fan."

She was kind of dumping on him but he just winced in sympathy.

"I'm sorry. I know you said he's kind of... imposing."

"He basically owns me," she blinked back sudden tears. "And there's nothing I can do to keep him from making me go back to the estate. Alone."

He snagged a napkin off of a passing tray, handing it to her so she could dab at her eyes before she ruined her makeup.

"Are you failing because of what happened to Max?"

"Sort of. I mean... yeah, but I could have tried harder, or asked for more extra credit or *something*. He'll find a way to be disappointed."

"I'm sorry. Do you want me to hang around? You should eat something, the food is actually amazing, and I could show you the pieces we have out."

He offered his arm to her and after a moment of a thought she nodded, smiling, feeling suddenly very relieved, and looped her arm through his.

“That would be great, actually but...” They were walking towards one of the tables and she glanced at him from the side of her eye. “Why are you being nice to me?”

“Should I... not be?” He asked, clearly confused.

“I fucked it up with Mike,” she stated bluntly. “He’s your friend. Shouldn’t you hate my guts?”

“You apologized, didn’t you?”

“Well yeah, but—”

“Mike is one of my best friends but he’s been really angry. More angry than he needs to be. He’s always kind of had a problem with that.”

“But I kissed Lucas... that’s like the worst thing.”

“Yeah, that was really dumb. But you apologized and... look, you didn’t tell me a whole lot and that’s okay but I know you have emotional stuff that holds you back. It’s been your dad and your depression and all of that... Mike knew that too,” Will shrugged, like it was simple. “He’s holding onto it too much. You weren’t being... I mean Lucas said it was a mistake.”

“It was. Worse than failing A&P. I wish I could take it back.”

“And you told him that? Mike?”

“Yes,” she nodded, knowing she’d more than that. Done more than that.

“Then honestly he needs to figure out what he wants and quit being a dick because that’s not helping himself or you,” Will looked thoughtful. “Not saying he isn’t allowed to be mad but it’s been like a month and you apologized... holding on is just hurting him more. But he doesn’t always see that.”

She blinked, not expecting him to be so... clairvoyant. He saw the situation from all sides and didn't pick one to be on, he just told it like it was.

"Has anyone ever told you you're like crazy wise?"

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Maybe once or twice."

They'd done a quick lap and El hadn't seen Papa, but Will led her up a staircase to another balcony as they talked and she scanned the mass of people for the familiar white hair and cold eyes. The food was good and the art was beautiful and talking to Will, like she had wanted to in the first place, really was helping. She felt calmer somehow.

"So you don't think I'm stupid, two-timing bitch?"

"You're a bitch sometimes, El, but not because you *like* to be," he said honestly. "You have a lot of fears that are understandable... to me at least. Maybe it's just because I had a shitty dad too."

"Mike mentioned that once. A deadbeat, loser, asshole?"

"I haven't seen him in three years and I've never been happier," he shrugged, the best way to explain. "I have my mom and brother though, I know you were mostly alone."

A pause.

"Mike's dad wasn't great either... right?"

Will snorted. "Not great, yeah. Abusive and manipulative... no."

"That's fair."

Her heart had calmed, Will's quiet presence and sympathy giving her the strength she needed to remember how to breathe. Having someone, anyone, made it so much easier and she glanced at Will again, wondering if there was some way to thank him. He'd been a good friend to her even though she hadn't really deserved it.

Maybe she could save up and get him paints or something? She was

terrible at being grateful, since Max didn't really require proof. If only she could ask Mike—

“Jane.”

The sound of her name sent a shiver down her spine, the familiar, chilly voice enough to make her want to run. But she did what she needed to do and turned around instead, pasting an impossibly cheerful, impossibly fake, smile onto her face.

“Papa,” she greeted, her entire body tensing as she laid eyes on the man who was legally her father.

Martin Brenner wasn't a big man, but he was imposing, his mere presence enough to make you shudder. His snow white hair was properly cut and styled, his black suit pressed and impeccably spotless, everything about him... perfect.

But El knew better.

“I see you managed to find something appropriate to wear. There were no charges on your account.”

“I borrowed it, from the theater costume room.”

“It's fine,” he sniffed, turning his calculating eyes onto Will, who was still standing behind her. “Is this your date?”

“Oh, no, just a friend, Papa. I... I came alone. This is Will, he's an artist and he helped to set up the Gala here. His artwork is amazing, I think most of his pieces are downstairs, did you see them?”

“I did,” he stuck his hand out and Will shook it, looking nervous. “I'm Dr. Martin Brenner.”

“W-Will Byers. Nice to meet you... sir.”

Papa didn't look disappointed or offended and El felt a bead of sweat drip down her back, the whole exchange making her nervous. Any time she introduced him to someone she actually liked she was always nervous he would do something... bad. Because he wasn't good.

"There are several doctors and hospital administrators here tonight, Jane. Have you spoken to any?"

"N-Not yet," she licked her lips nervously. "I haven't talked to many people... I thought I would observe first."

"Observation is useful but tonight your best tactic is being proactive. Talk to them, Jane. They need to know your name, need to know who you are," his grip on his champagne glass tightened. "That's how you make the connections that will serve you later on."

"Yes, Papa."

"Your brother was never so shy, when he was in college—"

She tuned out a bit, familiar with the stories of her older 'siblings' successes. But she wasn't them and she didn't want to be what he wanted her to be. It was the same shadow she'd been living in her entire life and she stifled a sigh, trying to look engaged with what he was saying.

"—with unnecessary distractions," he finished. "You have to keep your eyes on where you want to go and then move towards it."

"I know."

"Where are your eyes, Jane? Where have they been looking?"

*At Mike*, she immediately thought. But that wasn't something she was going to tell him. Ever. Mike was her own secret, something she would always keep sheltered away from him, a bit of happiness she wanted to remember even though it hurt.

Instead she cleared her throat, readying the speech she'd been thinking about the past two days, to try and explain what had happened.

"Papa, I need to... I have to tell you something," she swallowed. "About a month ago Max was attacked while walking back to the dorm by her stepbrother and was stabbed. She was unconscious for three days due to an infection and when she woke up... I spent a lot of time taking care of her."

His face remained passive, eyes unblinking, like he didn't care that her best friend, who had saved her life, had almost died.

"I missed classes and—"

"You missed classes? To take care of *Max*?" His voice was hard and her heart sunk.

"Yes, her wound had to be taken care of and she couldn't move without support so I missed some classes and... my grades dropped a bit. I have over eighty-five percents in everything except for A&P—"

"Which you still have an A in?"

"—which I'm... failing," she exhaled, feeling panic rise. "The tutor... fell through, and I missed too many labs. I tried talking to the professor but she was firm—"

"You're telling me you're *failing* a class?"

His face didn't change, but his eyes darkened, his lip twitching down. He was angry, disappointed, and she realized there was no way she could save anything. The shit she'd been hiding was about to hit the fan.

"I'll have to retake it next semester but there won't be any distractions because—"

"Because you'll be at home," he said firmly. "Clearly college was a mistake. Perhaps when you're a bit older and have better sight for your future."

"Papa," the desperation seeped into her voice, tears filling her eyes. "Please, it was just this once. I had to take care of Max... like she did for me."

"Regardless of what Max did or didn't do for you it still does not excuse this... abhorrent lack of respect. I've been paying good money for you to get an *education*, not to mess around."

"But I wasn't..." the tears welled over, dragging her mascara down her cheeks in messy, black streaks. "I wasn't messing around, I was

—”

“Dr. Brenner, sir,” Will cut in, surprising El, who hadn’t realized he was still there. “I studied with your daughter on several occasions. She’s really smart, but sometimes... life happens. She takes good care of her friend and tries her hardest to get good grades.”

Papa looked down at the young man and Will shrunk back, his bravado gone as he stared at man who reminded him of his own father. El gave him a grateful look but shook her head, knowing nothing he could say would make a difference now. The horrible truth was sinking in, that it was over and he was going to make her go back to the estate. Panic filled her and she stepped back.

“I c-can’t go back there, Papa. Please,” she was begging now. “Please don’t make me go back there, I’ll b-be alone and I c-can’t—”

“You will do as you’re *told*,” he snapped.

His hand was around her wrist, gripping so tight she whimpered, the glove slick under his fingers as he pulled her towards him, suddenly furious, his face turning red with anger. He spoke low into her ear, voice threatening.

“I was the one who took you, a tiny, pathetic, drug-addicted newborn, and raised you as my own. I’ve given you everything, every lesson, every tutor, every opportunity,” his voice hissed in her ear and she tried to pull away from his iron grip. “And *this* is how you repay me, with failing grades and pitiful excuses. Clearly you’re not ready for the real world. Maybe a few mores years at home will... motivate you.”

“No, please,” she whispered. “I’ll try harder.”

“You will. At home,” he shoved her back, releasing his grip and she almost feel, tottering on her heels. “This isn’t something you get to debate, Jane. You’ll go back to your dorm and start packing immediately.”

He was moving her, gripping her again, through the crowd of people and down the stairs. She barely caught a glimpse of Will, looking

worried and talking to someone on his phone. Part of her wondered if she'd even get to say goodbye to anyone. Was this really it? Was it all over now?

Papa was saying something, low in her ear, but she didn't hear what were probably threats of isolation, too numb and full of disbelief. The bright future she'd seen just a few months ago had crumbled to dust, running like sand through the fists she'd made. It was all over. She was leaving, her dream of helping people through psychology... gone. Max would be left behind, safe with Dustin at least, but... gone. And Mike... she was coming to terms that she'd lost him too.

Gone.

They were almost to the front of the museum, in one of the side galleries that was quiet, walking up the corridor, his grip bruising her wrist again. Every time she tried to slow, tried to keep the inevitable from happening he squeezed harder, tears coming to her eyes as she bit her lip, trying not to whimper. It only made it worse when she cried.

There was a flurry of footsteps from in front of them and a sudden murmur in the crowd, and then she blinked as someone appeared in the doorway, positive she was hallucinating. There was no way he was here, why would he possibly—

“El?”

It was Mike.

Her heart slammed into her ribs as he walked towards her and she moved, to try to go to him, but the hand on her wrist pulled her back and she winced, turning to look at Papa.

“Let me go,” she said firmly, the mere sight of Mike's face enough to give her courage. “I need to talk to him.”

“We're leaving, Jane. I don't care who that is but he's unimportant now.”

“Let me go!” she yelled.



Suddenly there was a gentler hand, ripping the painful grip off, and she fell back, against something solid and warm and welcoming. She looked up, at the familiar face she had been longing for, and then immediately threw herself against him, feeling a sob bubble up her throat as his arms wrapped around her shoulders.

“Mike?” she whispered, looking at him through tear-blurred eyes.

“Hey, El,” he was grinning crookedly. “Sorry I’m late... I had to figure some things out.”

“Mike!” she sobbed harder, clinging to him like he was the only thing in the world.

His hand rubbed her upper back soothingly and she shivered, feeling relieved and confused and suddenly full of hope. He’d come but... he wasn’t dressed up, wearing one of his usual cotton button-ups and pair of black jeans, like he hadn’t been expecting to show up to the fancy event.

“Wh-wha—” she had to take a deep breath. “What are you doing here?”

“I promised a lot of things, El... and I broke some of those promises. But this one was too important and...” he shot a look at the serious man standing a few feet away, watching them with shrewd eyes. “Will called and reminded me. Here.”

He pulled a white envelope out of his back pocket, stepping back and putting it into her hands so she could look at it. It had her name on it, the return address the one from their college’s academic achievement office. She blinked, confused as to why they would be sending her something.

“Open it,” he encouraged her.

She did, unfolding the letter inside and scanning it.

*Dear Jane Brenner,*

*We are pleased to inform you that your GPA and academic achievements have qualified you for a full ride scholarship. The letters of*

*recommendation along with your SAT scores impressed our council and we are willing to allow a late application. This means the scholarship won't take affect until the Fall Semester of—*

Everything blurred as tears filled her eyes again, dripping onto the paper. A scholarship? A *full ride* scholarship? But she'd never applied, she thought her high-income parentage would disqualify her from even being considered.

"How did... what?" she gasped.

"Max helped me," he explained. "Gave me your social security number and stuff so I could fill out the application, sorry, but I had some of your teachers write letters of recommendation and honestly, El, you're a good enough student there was no way—"

"You... you did this?"

"Yeah, I mean, I sent in the application and talked to some of the higher ups that like me. It'll cover your tuition but not boarding, so you'll have to find someplace to live or make enough to stay in the dorm—"

"Why?" she blurted, unable to comprehend his sudden kindness. "You *hate* me."

His brows furrowed. "No I... I never hated you. I mean, maybe I thought I did but I... I believe you now. That you didn't mean to... that it was a mistake."

"You do?"

She barely dared to breath.

"Yeah. And you were right, I promised those things and I broke those promises but this one..." he gestured towards the letter. "I promised I would find a way to set you free, El. And I worked on it and I knew I couldn't keep it from you. That would have been... cruel. Like him."

There was suddenly another presence next to her and she looked over as Papa snatched the letter from her hands, scowling fiercely. He read it and then sneered.

"This is clearly a mistake. You're not eligible."

"Actually, she is. You have a shit ton of money but since she was adopted and has been emancipated, she isn't a dependent any more. She also qualifies for several grants for being a drug baby, believe it or not. There's grants for everything..." he shrugged, refusing to cower at Papa's glare, his height giving him an advantage. "She doesn't *need* your money."

"Who the hell are you?"

"Mike Wheeler, sir. Her A&P tutor."

"The class she's failing?"

"Not anymore... I'm the TA, and Dr. McNeill was a little more understanding when I explained the situation in depth. She gets a lot of stupid excuses but I showed her Max's doctor's notes and she had to believe me. Oh yeah," he turned to El again. "You can make up the labs you missed but the tests will rely on your final exam so you'll have to ace it."

"I can do that," she breathed.

She was staring up at him, feeling her heart swell. But he still seemed distant and unsure, the initial hug warmer than how he was now as he stepped back from her. Fear swept in again and she opened her mouth to ask what all of this meant. Was he forgiving her?

"What gives you the right? She's *my* daughter. Mine," Papa snarled, so out of his usual cool, collected demeanor that El felt her mouth drop open.

"I loved her, sir. She may not be mine or ever feel the same, but I promised her I would help her get away from you," Mike's voice turned to ice and he straightened, towering over the suddenly small man.

"She's a... a failure! She doesn't *deserve* your sympathy or help."

"Maybe not," he shrugged. "But everyone deserves to be free. Failures or mistakes aside, she's a human being... not some possession you

can keep locked up or be selfish about.”

There was a new clarity in his eyes, the words he was saying the same he'd only just learned. People don't belong to people, not even because of love. Jealousy doesn't accomplish anything. Forgiveness is more important.

“Mike,” she started to say, wanting to try and finally tell him the truth, of what lived inside of her and burned for him.

But he didn't let her, stepping closer and leaning down and kissing her gently, his nose pressed against hers, his warm hands cupping her face. It was soft and quiet and quick, so quick she didn't realize it was over until he was backing away. Her eyes snapped open, searching for his and she saw sadness fill them. Realization washed over her.

*He's saying goodbye. He thinks I don't love him. He thinks this is it.*

“Mike—”

“Sorry it took so long for me to realize that, El. Maybe some day you'll find someone you can let yourself love. Someone who deserves you.”

“No, Mike, I—”

“Bye, El.”

He stepped back, out of the smaller hallway, vanishing into the crowd before she could say another word. She charged after him, unwilling to let him get away this time, but a hand caught her shoulder and she felt herself being pulled back roughly.

*No, her heart went after him, Mike, wait.*

“Jane, listen to me,” Brenner's voice was... desperate? “You can't do this. I won't allow you. I've spent too much time and money to let you—”

“To *what* ? To let me be happy? To let me actually live my life?” She shook her head as the reality on the piece of paper in her hands set in. “I don't *need* you and I don't want you.”

Her cheek suddenly stung, her whole head snapping to the left, and it took a few seconds for her to realize he had *slapped* her, her mouth gaping open, eyes wide. She touched her cheek with her hand, turning her head back to look at him, anger rising.

“You will do as I tell you, Jane, or I will make your life a living *hell*,” he snarled, losing all sense of control as his face turned purple with rage.

“You already *did*!” she screamed. “God, you think my life has ever been something other than a hell?! Growing up most of my life alone with you constantly telling me I wasn’t good enough, that I was disappointment?!”

“Adversity builds strength!”

“Not when you have fucking *depression* and *anxiety* and everything makes you want to just die!” She ripped the gloves off, letting them fall to the floor, baring her wrists to him as her eyes filled with tears. “Did you never understand that this was because of *you*?!”

He faltered for just a second. “I can’t be to blame for your weaknesses.”

“Of course, it’s always my fault. Always has been, always will be,” she shook her head. “I’m done trying to be what you want me to be. I’m not your perfect daughter... don’t you have enough of those? Why do you need *me*? ”

She remembered something, reaching into her clutch and pulling out her phone as he looked at her, seemingly dazed. The contact took a second to find but she hit the call button and pressed it to her ear.

“This is Roman Brenner.”

“Roman?” Papa’s eyes widened in alarm. “Um, it’s Eleven... I know it’s been a few years since you made that offer but—”

“It still stands. Aren’t you at college now?”

“Yeah, but I have a scholarship now and I don’t need him. He says he’ll ruin me but—”

“I won’t allow that. I’ve been building a case on him for years. If you want him locked up that’s a possibility—”

The phone was ripped from her ear and smashed to the ground, shattering the screen. El looked up just as his hand grabbed her hair, pulling her down and away from the freedom she’d been starting to grasp. She cried out in pain as she started dragging her, towards the exit, his eyes wild.

“Let me go!” she screamed, her eyes watering with pain, trying to scratch and kick, unwilling to let herself be taken away. “Let me go, you bastard!”

And then the hand was gone and she was on the ground, two burly security guards holding Papa as he thrashed in their grip.

“Do you know who I *am*? Let me go or I’ll have your asses fired and make it so you’ll never find a job again you giant—”

“Sir, you were attacking one of our students on campus,” the tall one said, seeming almost bored. “We have grounds to call for your arrest and for you to be charged with assault.”

“You don’t want to do that,” Papa’s voice was suddenly oily. “I could... make it so you both are well taken care of if you—”

“I have it on video. All of it. Including when he slapped her,” a quiet voice peeped up as Will appeared from the far end of the gallery. “I’m the one who called you. It was an unprovoked assault.”

The security guard radioed something, mentioning the police, and Brenner thrashed again, looking towards El, suddenly desperate.

“It was just a family spat, I-I’m her father! She’ll tell you!”

The men looked towards her, noting how there was no resemblance, but shrugged. Will had come up next to her and helped her stand up, her hand rubbing at her sore scalp. But she looked down, meeting the chilly, suddenly frantic eyes of the man who had raised her. The one who had isolated her, had told her she wasn’t good enough, had let her starve when she disobeyed and locked her in closets when she made mistakes.

Her textbooks had told her the truth she had wanted to pretend wasn't real. That she had been abused. Neglected. Mistreated. She had been a child. She had deserved better.

Tilting her chin up she looked the security guards in the eye.

"I've never seen this man before in my life. He's nothing to me," she told them, voice full of the ice he had put into her. "If the police come I'll give a statement but I don't... I don't want to see him anymore."

"We'll keep him here. Miss, will you be okay?"

"I'll take her back to her dorm, her friend will be there and she can help too," Will's hand was on her arm, carefully comforting her.

They exchanged some information and then she was walking, Will next to her, out of the museum as people stared. Her hair was a mess, her mascara smudged and trailing down her face from the tears. Will was quiet but didn't waver, his presence comforting, but her mind was racing.

She was free.

He couldn't control her anymore, and sure, there were things that needed to be done to make sure everything would work out, but it wasn't out of reach. The future was back, shining brightly, warm and certain and free from the black cloud she'd called Papa.

Because of Mike.

Her feet stopped moving and she froze rather abruptly as she remembered him kiss her goodbye and vanish into the crowd of people. He had come and saved her, not just from being taken away but... he said he loved her. Or had. Did he still? She needed to know.

Will looked at her, confused.

"You okay, El?"

"Mike," she blurted. "I-I have to see Mike. He did this... he helped me and he didn't break the promised and I n-need to tell him—"

“I can call him—”

“No, I need to *see* him, Will. I need to tell him I love him.”

“Oh.”

There was a moment as they looked at each other with wide eyes and then Will grinned widely. He had known her struggle and hearing her say it surprised him but filled him with joy. He didn’t actually know where he was but he had a guess.

“I bet he’s in his room... do you want me to—”

She bent down and took her shoes off, knowing they would slow her down, shoving them into his arms and feeling grateful for his willingness to help.

“Can you take these back to Max and tell her what happened? I would call her but my phone is... I have to go and see him. Now. I *need* to see him,” she said breathlessly, heart beginning to race at the thought.

“Go, El,” Will nodded. “Go find him.”

She turned, ignoring her throbbing head and focusing on her heart that was leaping, taking off and sprinting towards the tall dormitory in the distance, where the person she wanted to see more than anything in the entire world was. He was all he could think of and she sped up, urging herself on.

Her bare feet pounded the sidewalk, her pretty dress swishing around her knees, people giving her weird looks as she ran by them, confused. She felt laughter bubble up, the whole thing ridiculous and perfect, a sense of relief filling her as she ran even faster, spreading her bare arms and heading towards the boy she loved.

*I’m free.*

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

i love will and i want the best for him so he's just an angel all around.



i don't like brenner and while i wanted him to a real obstacle, i still don't consider him a villain or THE villain. aaaaaannnnnd now he's been vanquished lol. to the person who said she was gonna poop her pants if mike showed up and kissed at the gala... i hope you wore a diaper? xD

we're so close guys!! that happy ending is cOMING I PROMISE.

thanks for all the comments, i've been reading them but i've been writing instead of replying but i swear you all give me so much life. i adore each and every one of you.

-g

## 21. I could even learn how to love like you

### Notes for the Chapter:

have you guys ever watched steven universe? fantastic show. 10/10 would recommend. there's a song from it called "love like you" and it's kind of... it's this story a bit. from el's perspective, talking about mike. i listened to it a lot while writing this chapter.

which took forever and i'm so sorry but i wanted to get it right. and it kept getting longer and longer and i hope it's not too long but there's a lot to cover and a lot for mike and el to talk about it... from what i understand you guys like long chapters but idk i feel like i'm copping out or something lol.

so here it is. the final chapter.

there is going to be an epilogue which will be up before midnight pacific time on thursday/friday morning because i'm going to be up all night watching season 2 anyways. i just have to write it first heh.

ummmm yeah sorry this took so long but i sometimes it just does. check out that song if you want and i hope you all like.

*Bang bang bang!*

El almost broke the door with her fist she was so eager. A huge smile lit up her face as the door opened, expecting to see the familiar, freckled face she had been missing so much. But it was just Dustin, looking alarmed, partially at her bedraggled appearance but mostly because she'd damn near punched through the door.

“Oh, woah, hey, El is everything—”

"Where's Mike?" She interrupted, still panting from her sprint. "Is he here?"

"No, sorry, he got a call from Will like half an hour ago and got up and left without saying anything... why? What happened? You look kind of—"

"God *damn* it," she swore, irritated that something so simple was getting so complicated. "Where is he?"

"You could call—"

"My dad broke my phone."

"What?" He looked utterly confused. "Why?"

"Because I—It's a long story, but I need to talk to Mike and—"

"Okay, calm down. Do you want me to call him and see where he is? I'm sure he'll come back if I tell him there's an emergency or something..."

She was struck by a sudden idea, glancing upwards. If they talked she didn't really want to confess her love in front of Dustin. Privacy was hard to come by but she knew a place and looked back at her alarmed friend.

"Can you call him? I'm..." She was struck by the sudden fear that Mike might refuse to talk to her. He'd said his goodbye, what if that was it? "Tell him I'll be up on the roof. And tell him it's urgent... like super important. Like 911."

"The roof? What are you—"

"Just promise me you'll tell him?"

"El, why are you going—"

"*Promise* me," she insisted, not wanting to tell him about their spot. Mike would understand... she hoped. "It's... just trust me, okay? I need you to do this for me."

“Um,” he still looked uncomfortable but nodded. “Okay, I promise.”

She threw her arms around him and gave him a quick, excited hug, almost bouncing on him. He hugged her back more tentatively, clearly still concerned about what she meant by the roof. But she didn't give him a chance to ask any more questions, letting go and then whirling around and racing for the elevator, feeling giddy all over again.

It was finally going to happen.

Her feet kind of hurt and she looked down, realizing she'd cut her toe on something running over, her soles sore and covered in grime. She caught her reflection in the shiny metal of the elevator door and shuddered at what she saw, trying to rub some of the mascara streaks off of her face and giving up, smoothing her hair and hoping Mike wouldn't mind that she was a total fucking mess.

He never minded before. The days she was too exhausted or depressed to wear makeup, he seemed to always make a point to say she looked nice, which annoyed the fuck out of her. Makeup was something she liked to wear, but she didn't rely on it to feel good and while she appreciated his attempts to make her feel good about herself, it was unnecessary.

But she'd always liked that he was sweet enough to try.

The door to the roof was jammed a little harder than usual and she nearly bruised her shoulder getting it open, blinking in the warm evening sunshine. It wasn't quite summer hot, even though May was in full effect, and she enjoyed seeing the previously bare trees now covered in thick, green foliage from up above.

She wasn't sure how long she'd have to wait, hoping that he would hurry if he thought it was something really important. And it was. She was going to tell him she loved him. Because she did, she loved him so much her heart felt like it would explode and set fireworks whistling off in different directions.

Wandering out she sighed, looking down at the concrete, covered in pockmarks and smalls tones, some old leaves drifted into the corners.

Her eyes fell on something familiar.

His scuff mark was new, she realized. It went past the last one she'd seen, the one she'd helped make after kissing him so fiercely he hadn't been able to realize what was happening. She wondered what had motivated him to take another step, what had happened in the month she hadn't seen him that would push him further out.

It was useless to wonder and instead she wandered all the way out, to the ledge that surrounded the edge of the building like a lip, looking straight down at the paths below. Heights didn't scare her, really. She wasn't about to dangle over the edge or do something that would make her fall, but she felt daring, carefully sitting down and swinging her legs over, kicking them into the empty space that stretched beneath her, her skirt puffed out around her as she sat and looked across the expansive landscape before her.

The sun was just beginning to kiss the horizon and it reminded her of the first time he had brought her up. After watching 80's movies and throwing a tantrum at the theater when she'd barely talked to another guy. He'd been possessive, like Papa, and she'd tried to break it off with him. But it wasn't because he wanted to own her, but because he was afraid of losing her. How had she not seen it? Had she been in that much denial?

He had loved her, even then. Did he still? He'd seemed happy to see her and give her the envelope, but he'd left... why had he left? Why had he said goodbye?

*Because he thinks there's no chance. That you'll never love him. Why would he want to hold on to that when it only hurts him more?*

It made her wince but she supposed it was fair. She'd been trying to let go of him too... but that hadn't worked so well. Her heart was selfish, holding him tightly.

*What if he doesn't love me anymore? What if I confess all of this for nothing?*

There was flicker of fear, of self-doubt, and she tried shove it out and let it fall off the building, where she wouldn't have to think about it.

It didn't matter. Whether or not he loved her, she needed to tell him, needed him to know that he meant something. That he wasn't nothing and that he never had been.

Because he was... everything. Everything that mattered now.

She was so lost in thought she didn't hear the door open behind her, didn't hear the frantic footsteps and the panting, didn't see the dark eyes widen in fear or notice the split second of hesitation. Her eyes were closed as she felt the gentle breeze on her face, swinging her legs over the side of the building, thinking about warm, ebony eyes and crooked grins and snorting, stupid laughter.

A pair of arms circled her waist and she shrieked as she felt herself being pulled backward, off of the concrete ledge, so quickly she scraped the backs of her calves on the rough concrete. The hands pulled her back and up, a good two feet away from the edge and she panicked as they squeezed so tight the air was pushed from her lungs, leaving her gasping.

*What if it's Papa, what if he got free and he's come back to finish the job.*

Her nails automatically dug into the wrists and there was a yelp as they let go, her mind going into fight mode like it had earlier at the gallery. She whirled, face twisted into a snarl, ready to kick ass if she needed to. But then her eyes met the very ones she'd been thinking about, the dark amber depths full of confusion and fear as they stared at her.

"Mike?" Her heart leapt towards him. "What... why did you do that? You scared the *shit* out of me," she asked, suddenly breathless as she clutched her chest.

"I wasn't going to let you *jump*." His eyes were huge and alarmed.

"Wha—Wait, you thought I was going to jump?! Why would I do that?"

"B-Because Dustin said it was an emergency and he seemed worried and he said you were on the roof and you were sitting there looking down—"

“Not because I was planning to jump!” She deflated, rubbing her temples and feeling suddenly annoyed at how this playing out. “I told him to tell you it was *important*, Jesus, not that I was going to kill myself. I’m not exactly in the mood to die today.”

She said his fear out loud, rolling her eyes at the outlandish assumption and his shoulders slumped down completely, the fear draining out of him as he realized she was serious. Had he actually thought she had come up here to throw herself off the building? After what he’d just done for her at the gala?

It was suddenly tense and she felt hurt that he had such little faith in her, the excitement dimming. She had been so ready to confess her love but now it felt too awkward, like they both wanted to say something but didn’t know what. He looked her up down, the lack of panic allowing him to realize how beat up she looked, her hair and makeup a mess, her feet bare.

“What happened to your hair? And your shoes?” He squinted. “Why is your cheek all red?”

“He slapped me. My da—” No, she wasn’t going to call him that anymore. “I mean... Brenner,” she admitted.

“He did *what*?!”

Outrage filled his eyes and he jerked, like he had the sudden urge to turn around and go downstairs and try to find the asshole. Her heart warmed back up a bit and she decided she should fill him in on what had happened.

“Um, yeah, he wasn’t too happy with what you did... and then I called my sister and I guess that freaked him out because he kind of smashed my phone and tried to drag me out of the building by my hair.”

“You’re not fucking serious.” He balled his fists, clearly pissed off at the thought of her in pain, at the thought of being unable to go back and help. “Please tell me you’re not serious.”

“I wish I wasn’t,” she winced as she rubbed her still tender scalp.

“Will called the security guards and recorded the whole thing on his phone and I guess the asshole is going to get arrested or something, I don’t know, I didn’t want to look at him anymore.”

“I should have stayed, I didn’t think he’d get violent—”

“I didn’t either. He never was before. Don’t blame yourself, Mike,” she tried to soothe.

“But he *hit* you, El, that’s so shitty and cruel and—”

His face was turning red and she reached out, setting her small hand on his arm and giving a gentle squeeze before pulling back. She wanted to reassure him but she was afraid of crossing whatever line was still between them.

“He can’t touch me now,” she smiled shyly. “Because of what you did back there. I never have to see him again.”

“Yeah, well,” he scratched the back of his neck, his nervous habit, “I knew that was one promise I couldn’t break.”

“You didn’t break any of them... I think? I was thinking about it...” she shifted nervously. “And I don’t think you did.”

He looked confused, like he couldn’t believe her and there was shadow of guilt in his eyes, like he still wasn’t over the idea of breaking promises. She tried to explain what she meant.

“You were there when I needed you. Tonight, I mean. He would have dragged me all the way back to the estate and I wouldn’t have fought. I didn’t know I had a reason to.”

“I mean, Will called me—” he tried to protest.

“But you still didn’t *have* to come. I did a stupid thing and I hurt you and I didn’t deserve your kindness,” she shrugged.

“Well, okay maybe, but—”

“And you waited. For me. Even though you didn’t think I could, you did wait, so that wasn’t broken either.” *Because now I love you.*



His brow wrinkled. "But you don't—"

"The only one I wasn't sure about was the last one..." she bit her lip, feeling her heart speed up, impossibly fast. "When you said... you would love me no matter what. Whether or not you still do, I guess."

It was the question she was dying to have answered, the one she needed to know before she could bare her own heart to him. As much as she wanted to think it didn't matter, she was suddenly nervous she'd come across desperate or crazy if she just... blurted that she loved him.

He was looking down at her, and she felt her eyes trying to memorize his face, the way his eyes squinted slightly when he was thinking and how he licked his lips. She'd missed those a lot, the way they traced her face and left spots of warmth behind when he kissed her. Now they were pursed, his shoulders tense as he looked down, not wanting to meet her eyes.

Her heart fell, plummeting off the side of the building. He didn't love her.

"I..." he squirmed, clearly uncomfortable. "I don't want to make you feel, weird, El, it's awkward and I'm awkward and I don't want to push my feelings onto you so I thought I'd just say goodbye and leave you alone—"

"You do still love me?" Her voice squeaked, barely daring to believe.

He slumped, biting his lip like he wanted to gnaw the whole thing off instead of answer the question. But with a sigh he nodded.

"Yeah... I never really stopped, I guess. Even when I was mad. Part of the reason I was so pissed was because even though you'd done *such* a shitty thing... I still wanted you and it wasn't fair," he let out a shuddery breath. "Sorry, um, I know that's stupid but I—"

"Is that why you ran up here? Even though you don't run?"

It was a stupid question... of course that's why he ran to her when he thought she was going to jump off the top of the building. It was so obvious she flinched a bit the stupidity of what had just come out of

her mouth. But he didn't notice, nodding and shrugging.

"Yeah, I mean, on the phone Dustin said..." Mike had his arms crossed, posture tense. "He said they found you with razor blades. That you were thinking about... hurting yourself again.

"He wasn't supposed to tell you that," she frowned, suddenly a bit irked at Dustin.

"Why not?"

"It's something you needed to know. It's not relevant to... any of this."

"How is not *relevant*?" He was outraged for a blink of an eye and then guilty again. "Was it... was it something I said? I know I was mad but I wouldn't... I mean, nothing I could ever say in anger would mean I would want you to hurt herself," his voice was softer. "I don't want you to die, El. Or make you think you want to."

She shook her head, wanting to silence his doubts. It had never been his fault.

"It wasn't what you said or did, Mike. It was me. I was so mad and upset with myself because I hurt you in the worst way. It was..." her eyes glassed over a bit. "It felt like everyone and everything I touched... I ruined. Like my existence was hurting people and it would have been better to just stop existing."

"But that's not—"

"I know," she cut in, then softened. "I know. I didn't do it, right? I decided I wanted to live because... because it's worth it, I guess. My insecurities... I let them turn me into a victim. I always have. I let myself be a victim of Papa's disappointment and my own sadness because it was easier than trying to fight them. Fighting is hard."

His hand twitched, like he wanted to reach out to her.

"And then when I hurt you I wasn't the victim anymore, I was the villain, pretending like I could blame my actions on my feelings when it was just me. My fault. And I didn't like being that either," she

swallowed, finally admitting to him the thing she'd come to realize three days ago. "I-I want to change... I want to fight against that more, to stop relying on Max and on others to give me reasons to live. I want to live for myself now." She gestured, to the rooftop they stood on. "I want to get closer to the edge of the roof. I want to be less afraid... I want to be more like you."

Her own words had given herself courage and she dared to look up and meet his eyes. They were dark but full of something else... of belief, the thing he'd lacked before in the lab. He believed her and her heart leapt towards him as they stared into each other's eyes. He glanced away and swallowed, like he was remembering something.

"What are you afraid of? Your dad?"

"No, not anymore... he can't touch me now, thanks to you and my... sister I think," she smiled gratefully and then grew somber again, biting her lip but knowing it was time to admit it. "I'm afraid of being *loved*. And of letting myself love. I'm afraid of hurting people. I'm afraid I'll always be a dysfunctional mess and that I'll never get better."

She paused and took a deep breath.

"And now... I'm afraid I might hurt you again. Because seeing that look of pain on your face and knowing it was my fault... I regret hurting you more than *anything*, Mike. Even more than trying to kill myself."

There was a pause and she glanced up at him once again. He had been so quiet, listening to every word, like he was trying understand more. But his mouth opened and he finally choked out a sentence.

"Why? Why are you telling me this?"

It was the same question he'd asked in the lab when she'd apologized, but this time the fear was gone from her heart, replaced with certainty.

*He loves me. And I love him.*

For a second she closed her eyes and took a breath, but nothing was

holding her back. Her eyes snapped open and she reached out, setting a hand on his chest, feeling his heart beat beneath her palm, so warm and alive. Their eyes met and she let it pour out of her, so intensely she heard him gasp, his breath stolen.

“Because I love you, Mike,” she breathed. “I love you so much it hurts. Right here.”

Her hand was pressed against his chest, her own heart aching as she finally let the truth she’d been hiding for so long out into the open. His face was blank but then his eyes warmed, something close to amazement coming over him.

“You’re not lying,” he whispered. “Your eyebrows always twitch when you’re lying but—”

“I love you,” she said it again with more fervor, willing him to believe. “I love you, Mike.” She reached up, cupping his face in her hands, thumbs brushing the freckles she adored. “I love you, I love you, I love you, I—”

His lips cut her off and then his arms were pulling her in, towards him where she knew she had always belonged. They kissed hungrily, silent fireworks exploding around them as the air vibrated with the intensity of the love between them. It was like a for moment the world froze and everything was for them, the sun shining, the birds singing, the world turning. Just for them.

When he pulled back his cheeks were wet, eyes wide and full of the love she had finally allowed him to see. Her own face was damp with tears but she was grinning up at him as he started to try and apologize.

“El, I’m sorry, I was afraid and hurt and—”

She cut him off, not wanting him to take the blame.

“You had every right to be. I’ve been so *stupid* and scared—”

“I didn’t help, I let you think I hated you—”

“I let you think I didn’t want you—”

He shushed her with another kiss, stealing the words from her lips before pulling back and looking down at her, smiling softly, just for her.

“I love you, El, I always have,” another kiss. “I don’t care about what happened with Lucas anymore because you’re telling me you love me and—”

“Mike,” she gasped, hands on his cheeks, staring up at him, wanting him to hear it again, as many times as it took until he believed it. “Mike, I love you. I love you so much, I’ll never do anything like that again. I’m yours for good this time.” She let herself smile. “I *promise*.”

He crushed her against his chest as he wept again, tears of happiness and relief dripping into her tousled hair and onto her bare shoulder as he held her like he never wanted to let to go. Her dress swished around their knees, the setting sun making it glow and she squeezed him even tighter, wanting him to know she meant every word.

Because she loved him.

After a second she pulled back, looking up at him again, biting her lip, the guilt rising up.

“I really am sorry. For taking so long.”

“You don’t need to—I don’t care anymore, El,” his fingers brushed her hair out of her face and tucked it behind her ears. “I forgive you. For everything...” he cupped her cheek, his thumb stroking her lip gently. “I’ll always forgive you.”

“What if I—”

“Don’t,” he shook his head. “Don’t worry about that right now. It’s just your anxiety, okay? I believe you. You won’t hurt me again.”

“I’m going to get better at promises,” she gave him a watery smile, still feeling mushy. “I promise.”

“I love you so fucking much,” he blurted, then flushed. “Sorry. I just really like being able to say that.”

“I love you too.”

“God, I *really* love hearing you say it,” he grinned, that goofy one that made her roll her eyes, the one she’d missed so much.

She kissed him again, so fiercely he almost fell over backwards, his hands on her waist, as he held her securely. When she pulled back she was hit by another realization.

“Oh, you kept the other promise too. The one where you help me pass A&P?”

He looked sheepish. “I might have adjusted some of your quiz scores to make it factor to a passing C. With your final exam, I mean.”

She slapped his chest, giving him an outraged look of disbelief. No he had *not*.

“You *changed* my grades?!”

“Just... a bit,” he was biting back a smile. “I promised, didn’t I?”

“Yeah but—”

“How about you say thanks and maybe tell me you love me again instead of hitting me and making me feel terrible?”

“Hmph, fine. Thanks.” She buried her face into the front of his shirt and inhaled deeply. “I guess I can still love you... making me a cheater.”

She poked him in the side, in the usual ticklish spot and he squirmed, taking a step back, his leg hitting the concrete ledge that they had somehow backed up against. His eyes widened as he wobbled, balance going backward, leaning just slightly feeling himself falling, towards the edge of the rooftop.

Her hands grabbed the front of his shirt and ripped him back so forcefully he fell on top of her, knocking them both onto the ground. El groaned and gasped, the concrete slapping the air from her lungs as she collapsed backwards. Mike barely kept himself from crushing her as he stuck out his elbows and knees, landing between her legs

and grunting in pain as he scraped his joints.

“Ow, fuck!” she yelped.

“Ow, *fuck*,” he groaned.

They both gasped for a second, catching their breaths. She looked up at him, over her and as he leaned back to get off of her she reached, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him down to her lips. He didn’t hesitate, taking advantage of the position and pressing down, kissing her hungrily, eyes needy. She pulled back with a gasp, not expecting his reaction to be so intense.

It was impossible to pretend like their one night had woken up a new hunger, one that had missed him just as much her emotional side. Clearly his had missed her too.

She gave in for a moment, her hands tangling into his hair as she arched up to meet him, losing herself to his kisses. She had missed these moments too, the ones full of desire and need, where the world faded away and nothing mattered more than how they made each other feel.

He pressed down harder and she winced, her bare shoulders scraping against the concrete, a large rock digging into her spine. The world came back into focus and she couldn’t ignore how much pain she was in. Not comfortable at all.

“Mike,” she gasped as he started kissing down her neck, going lower. “I’m laying on top of a rock.”

“Huh?” He paused and looked at her, eyes hazy, lips wet.

“I... sorry, I would love to do this sometime when we’re on a blanket or something but I think right now I need to remove the boulder that’s lodged in my spine,” she complained. “It’s like an entire mountain. Everest, actually. In my spine.”

He eased back off her, looking completely stunned at her words. Then he started laughing, the exact laugh she’d missed so much, the one that snorted out of him like a broken trombone and made her smile. Crawling off, he shook his head and sat up on his knees,

pretending to be disappointed.

“First you scare me shitless by making me think you’re going to jump, then you try to push me off of a building—”

“Hey!” she yelled in protest. “I was just tickling you, *you’re* the one who almost fell!”

“—and then you deny me the simple pleasures of life by refusing my kisses—”

“Oh my god, *Michael*, do not even start with me, I had someone pull my hair today,” she scolded, rolling her eyes, everything feeling so normal and right. “Maybe some other time I’ll let you... what was that word? *Ravish*. I’ll let you ravish me under the stars when we have a blanket and—”

He kissed her again and she decided to shut up as she melted against him.

It was easy to make light of all the shit that had happened. Now that they were there together. Sure, she had to get a new phone, needed to figure out where she was going to live, where she was going to work... but none of that mattered right in the moment as she leaned against Mike’s solid frame.

Looking over towards the ledge, she realized just how close they were to edge of the building.

“Wait a minute, don’t heights scare you shitless? How did you make it all the way over here?”

“I thought you were going to jump off the fucking building,” he said, voice heavy. “I kind of hesitated but...”

“But?”

“The thought of losing you was scarier than the edge of a twelve story building,” he shivered and she felt herself melt a little bit. “I didn’t really like almost falling off just now, though. Can we maybe back up a bit?”



"Of course," she scooted back, looking at him fondly. "I guess you overcame that fear, huh?"

"You overcame your fear of love," he shrugged, like it was no big deal. "Heights seem kind of stupid after that..."

"Wow I totally love you."

She kissed him again before standing up, brushing the dirt off her dress and frowning as she noticed that the tulle skirt was a bit crumpled. Could you iron tulle or would it melt it? He looked down as she stepped towards the safety of the middle of the roof, noticing her dress again.

"Where did you get that, by the way? When I saw you at the gallery I kind of thought you were a pink angel..."

"An angel," she snorted.

"Yeah, but like, without wings."

"So... a person?"

He frowned, trying to grab at her as she playfully ducked out of reach of his long arms, a grin lighting up her face.

"Why is it impossible for you to accept my compliments," he whined. "Just let me love you."

"Mike, I will let you love me anyway you want but the day I stop picking apart your compliments is the day I have officially lost my mind," she teased.

He pouted as he finally caught her, huffing and draping himself across her shoulder, making a whiny noise and snuggling into her neck. *What a baby*, she snickered at his antics but then suddenly felt a huge wave of relief. Everything felt so normal again, his forgiveness understated but solid as he snuffled against her neck, his mop of hair tickling her face.

*I'm so lucky.*

Her arms reached up and wrapped around his neck, holding him firmly against her as she quieted.

“I missed you,” she murmured. “And this. Your dumb compliments. Your stupid laugh.”

“I missed you too. I was mad but I missed you and then I was sad and I missed you.” He frowned. “You think my laugh is stupid?”

“You sound like broken trombone had sex with an elephant that has a head cold.”

“You really know how to make a man feel good about himself.”

“I love it, though. Don’t ever change,” she begged. “I like to give you shit but you know I don’t want you to ever change anything ever, right?”

“El, if you didn’t give me shit I’d think something was wrong,” he pressed a kiss to her temple. “Besides I grew up with Lucas, I’m kind of used to it by now.”

At the mention of Lucas there was an awkward pause and El shifted back.

“Do I need to apologize to him too? I don’t want it to be weird.”

“It’s going to be weird until he decides to chill, but don’t let it bother you,” Mike shook his head, wincing a bit. “That’s just how he is. You both said it was nothing. I don’t care anymore.”

“Okay.”

There was a quiet pause, the only sound the slight wind whistling across the top of the building. She had strange feeling, like there was something he wanted to ask but was unsure. Reaching out she set her hand on his chest again, like she had during her confession, blinking up at him softly.

“What is it?”

“Hm?”

"You want to ask me a question. I can tell, you tilt your head and your forehead scrunches up. What is it?"

"Um—" He was still hesitant and she huffed, losing her patience.

"I just confessed my love for you on a rooftop after telling my dad to fuck off and getting assaulted. I don't think you can ask any questions that are going to be more wild than—"

"Are we dating?" he blurted, and then flinched.

His whole body tensed and she looked up, wondering why he was nervous. It was a pretty fair question now.

"Sorry, El, that's not cool, I'm being all possessive and clingy and—"

"What? No, you're not. What are you even talking about? Of course we're dating now, I mean I know I fucked it up last time and we weren't together that long but I *love* you. I want to be your girlfriend. We are most definitely dating now."

"But your dad—"

"He tried to *make* me his, Mike. But even adopting me didn't make me want to be a part of his family. I didn't choose or want him or... love him. I'm choosing to be with you because I do love you and I do want you. I want all of that, so don't feel bad that you want it too," she tilted her head and smirked. "I'll be yours again... your El."

Excitement lit up his face but he hesitated, leaning back against the door and looking down at her, brow furrowed.

"Are you sure, El? I don't want to ask too much of you. I can keep waiting—"

"Oh shut up. I was hoping for an *intelligent* boyfriend," she kissed his jawline, unable to reach his lips when he was standing up all the way. "So you can either be that and kiss me or get the hell off of this roof."

He blinked, a smile lighting up his face, and then kissed her, cupping her face in her hands and closing his eyes and pulling her close,

seeming grateful. She understood his insecurities just as much as he understood hers, and here she was, ripping away the doubt he'd put between them. There was no room for doubt anymore, only love, and he gave in completely just like she had, kissing her so fiercely she gasped when he finally pulled back.

"Okay, damn. I'm going to take that as a yes?"

"Fuck yes."

"Good."

She shivered a bit, her arms bare, and then looked down, realizing she'd left her gloves at the gallery. She hadn't even noticed, running her fingers down across the scars that marred her pale skin, blinking. Mike's warm hand obscured her view, wrapping around her wrist and bringing it up, kissing her palm gently as he looked down at her.

"You're beautiful, El. I've never stopped thinking that. You're like... like..." his eyes were shining, something poetic waxing into his voice, making her shiver. "Like the glow of the moon, gilding everything with silver, making the night so much brighter. Or a thousand stars that dapple the velvet night, a glimmering symphony in the sky. You're stunning, El. Like starshine reflected on water. I could stare at you forever."

"Oh," she breathed, speechless.

He was good with words and she struggled to find something to say back, something anywhere near as pretty.

"You know, the only time I believe all of that, about being beautiful moonshine or whatever... is when you say it," her voice was soft and she felt stupid but she wanted him to know just how he made her feel. "If I'm the moon, then you're the sun, Mike. I just reflect the light you make."

He blinked down at her earnest face, letting the words sink in all the way. She was being honest, though she was sure her words weren't as pretty. He was like sunshine, warming up her heart and melting the ice walls she'd put up for so long. Any shine or glow she gave off was

because of him and how he made her feel. Because of the light that poured out of him when he smiled at her.

A slow smile stretched across his face and she felt butterflies tickle her stomach as she gazed down at her fondly. He'd liked what she'd said.

"You are beautiful, El. I could just stare at you sometimes but I know you hate that so I don't."

"You're actually perfect, Mike Wheeler."

"Uh, no you are," he teased.

She opened her mouth to say something snarky but Mike's phone started ringing loudly, from his pocket—an annoying Yoda impression because of course he was a dork with a Star Wars ringtone—and he frowned, like he wanted to ignore it and keep telling her how amazing she was.

"How about you check it in case another one of our friends is getting stabbed?" she suggested dryly, also feeling a bit annoyed.

"Yeah, okay..."

He pulled it out, sighing at the name.

"It's Max. She really has terrible timing."

"We weren't even doing anything," she snatched the phone from his hands and answered instead. "Hello?"

"Ellie? Oh my god, okay, so you are okay. Dustin said you were on a roof and he was worried and he sent Mike up but it's been like an hour and—"

"Can you tell your boyfriend to chill? He actually thinks I'm suicidal, which is stupid. I'm not doing that again."

"I know, I know, but Will showed up with your shoes and told me what your dad did. Are you okay? Do you need anything?"

“No, I’m okay. I’m on the roof still with my boyfriend so—”

“WHAT?!”

El had known it was coming but winced at the volume anyways, glancing up at Mike and noticing his grin. She rolled her eyes but smiled back.

“Yeah, um, things are pretty great. Even if my best friend schemed against me and gave out my *social security number* and other *sensitive information*.”

“Oh... yeah. It was just Mike, though. It’s not like he would steal your identity.”

“Well, thanks, because it got me a full ride scholarship and I told Pa —” She caught herself again. “I told Brenner to fuck off. I don’t have to listen to him anymore. He can’t touch me now.”

“Will told me, sort of, but for *real*?!”

“Yeah, for real. I just have to figure out where I’m going to live. And stay over the summer... and get a job...” the anxiety started to creep in and she took a deep breath. “I-I’m sure it’ll—”

Mike interrupted her.

“What if you come home with me? For the summer, I mean, since the school year is basically over,” he looked as anxious as she felt, scuffling his feet. “It’s kind of small and boring but, um, Hawkins is nice enough and I’m sure you could find a job. And we have a big house, my sister’s old room is empty, my parents would probably let you stay.” He frowned. “I actually have no idea how they’re going to react when I tell them I have a girlfriend—”

“Mike,” she started to say, but was interrupted.

“Ellie, what’s he saying? I can’t hear,” Max complained.

Everything felt very overwhelming all of the sudden and she stared up at Mike with wide, uncertain eyes, ignoring Max’s nagging, wanting to focus on the amazing person in front of her.

"I'll... I'll come down in a bit and tell you," she said hurriedly. "Meet me at our boyfriends' room."

"But what's—"

She hung up and handed him back his phone, smirking a bit. Sure, she wasn't going to ignore her friend's calls anymore, but that didn't mean she had to finish the conversation. There were more important things to think about right now.

"You want to head downstairs?" He raised his eyebrows.

"No... but we should. My feet hurt and Max needs to be caught up and it's getting kind of chilly."

"Yeah, okay," he sighed, turning and reaching for the doorknob.

Her hand caught his elbow before he made it and she bit her lip, the nerves back. It was new, all of it, even if they technically had been dating before, and while she felt totally comfortable with him no matter what, the concept was difficult to grasp in some ways.

And he'd offered to take her home with him. *Home*. A place she'd never really had.

"Did you mean that? About the summer?"

"Um, y-yeah, but I know that's kind of a lot. Too much too soon. Sorry," he winced.

It was a lot. She'd only known him for five months, and they'd been dating for ten minutes. But the thought of it, the commitment, didn't scare her for some reason. Did it make her anxious? Yes. Meeting his parents for the first time? Potentially living in their house? Going to some tiny town for the entire summer, someplace new and foreign and full of people with judgemental gazes? Being away from Max? Doing something totally out of her comfort zone?

That would have scared her more than anything before, but it didn't now because... Mike would be there with her. And no matter what happened, he wouldn't let anything bad happen to her. So why be afraid?

"It's not, Mike. It's... I mean, would that be okay? Would your parents allow it? Is having your son's girlfriend stay with you weird?"

He looked at her, dumbstruck, eyes full of disbelief.

"Wait, you do want to? Come to Hawkins?"

"Well, I mean, I don't have a lot of options but..." she gave him a soft, teasing smile. "We just started dating and you would be leaving in like a week for an entire summer and that sounds like shit. I don't want to be away from you."

"What about Max?" he asked. Valid question.

"That's... I mean, her and I were kind of trying to figure out a way to convince my—to convince Brenner why I should stay with the summer. Her volleyball scholarship kind of requires it so she can practice but I didn't have a reason and now I can't afford it so..." she shrugged, a bit sad. "I don't want to leave her, but I'd rather go with you then back to the estate."

He grinned. "Really?"

"Yeah, but only if your parents are okay with—"

"I'm going to *make* them okay with it," he was visibly excited. "I mean, I'm twenty-two and I work all summer to help pay for college so they should—"

"Twenty-two?" She looked puzzled and then her eyes flew wide. "I missed your birthday. It was last month. Oh my god. I'm the worst."

He looked sheepish, like he didn't want to admit that he'd had a shitty birthday but also that it was obvious he'd been pretty emotionally wrecked that day. El shifted guiltily, feeling like the worst person in the entire universe.

"It's okay, El... it was fine. The guys did the usual birthday thing where they shove an entire cake in my face and got me some stuff. My mom sent an entire casserole somehow... don't worry about it," he shrugged, not wanting it to be a big deal.



“But I... I’ll make it up to you. Somehow. Whatever you want, okay? Just tell me what I can do and I’ll do it, I promise.”

“Whatever I want? Whenever I want?” He grinned crookedly.

“Okay, maybe not like... whenever. Within reason. Whatever you want within reason, I mean, I don’t have a lot of money...” she squinted at him, wondering what he was scheming, but he just smirked mischievously.

“I’m sure I’ll think of something,” his voice was lower and breathy and he leaned down closer to her. “Something that doesn’t require money.”

Their lips brushed and she shivered, feeling a sudden urge to jump his bones right there on the roof. They didn’t need a blanket, right? His hands were on her, sliding back and playing with the zipper on her dress and her mind went blank, her lips opening as—

*Your phone you must answer! Calling, a friend is!*

Yoda’s voice started talking from Mike’s pocket and they both jumped back, startled by the stupid ringtone. He pulled it out and silenced it with a huff and when he met her eyes she busted out laughing, unable to handle just easily the mood had been ruined.

“Wh-Who,” she had to stop and take a breath. “Who was it?”

“Max, again. Seriously. Worst timing,” he groaned.

“We should go down before she drags Dustin up there. I don’t want them trying to ruin our special spot.”

“This is our special spot?” He grinned again. “I like that.”

“Me too. Now come on, I’m sure you’ll get your birthday present soon enough if you let me talk to my roommate so she quits interrupting.”

“Is that a promise?”

“Yes. Come on you huge dork.”

So many things had happened and her mind was whirling a bit. But the future wasn't scary. She could go to Hawkins, get a job, start living a normal life. And she wouldn't have to hide her passion, how much she loved the mind and its inner workings. There would be nothing holding her back, keeping her from who she wanted to be.

He opened the door and gestured towards it.

"Ladies first," he snickered.

"When did I become a lady?" she shot back, rolling her eyes but going down the first few steps.

"That's a fair point."

His hand found hers and as they reached the landing he stopped her in front of the door, twirling her around and then looking down at her. She tilted her head, wondering what he was thinking, but was soon lost in her own thoughts as she stared up at him.

All of this was possible because of him. They were no fairytale, but in some ways he'd come swooping in with his promises and love and rescued her from the black pit of despair. Or had at least thrown her rope as she climbed out the rest of the way. Because she had done that herself, but his existence had been the catalyst.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"You. I just wanted to. Before we go down there."

"Why?"

"Cause you're beautiful and I love you," he shrugged. "I like to appreciate it when I can."

"You're a strange man, Michael E. Wheeler," she smirked before standing on her tiptoes and kissing him. "But I like that you're mine."

"And you're mine, El," he squeezed her, kissing her temple. "In all of your messy, twisty glory."

"I love you, Mike."

“I love you too, El.”

There was a breath of quiet and she sighed, reluctantly letting him go.

“Okay, down we go. Time to face the ugly music.”

“Is Max the ugly music?” he asked.

“Like the violins in Psycho. Shrieking,” she sighed.

“Good thing you love her.”

“Yeah, it’s a curse. Just like you. Love is weird.”

“Ouch.”

They bickered and teased all the way down, unable to keep their hands off of each other as she messed up his hair and he pressed playful kisses to her head, over and over. All the pain and the hurt that they had waded through was gone now, the calm familiarity surrounding them as the elevator went down. It dinged as it reached their floor and she felt his hand surround hers, turning her head to look up at him.

“You ready?” he asked, smiling that impish smile she loved so much.

It was an easy question. Their friends would be excited for them and what the future held. But she saw more than that. She saw him looking down at her for the rest of their lives, his eyes staying the same as they aged. Wherever she ended up, wherever they both went in the next ten, twenty, thirty years... she wanted him there too.

Because she loved him. And he loved her. And nothing could be more perfect than that.

Smiling she squeezed her hand in his, turning and pulling him from the elevator, suddenly excited to start the path she was envisioning. The one where they were always together. The one where she would always love him. No matter what happened, it’s what she would always want.

Raising an eyebrow, she smirked.

“Are you?”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

i love them so much. i'm glad you all do too. and yes that was a direct parks and rec reference in there because i love parks and rec and andy and april are just a tiny bit like mike and el in this story.

the epilogue will be set three years later so we can see what they're up to on el's graduation day. ;) it'll be a cute fun thing so stay tuned for that!

um this story came from a really personal place for me. i struggled with a lot of what el struggles with, though i have good parents and a stronger support system so i never quite got as bad as she did. i'm afraid of saying too much because it's just so... personal. but all of this came from a real place, a place a lot of you have told me in the comments you've been too.

and i wanted this to be a story that proves you're not alone. you're not the only who has walked that path and you can get better. not cured. not solved. but better. it's been almost six years since i last self-harmed and i still struggle with the urges, with the wanting to die, with wanting to disappear instead of live feeling so depressed. i have seasonal affective disorder so fall and winter and cold make it really hard for me and even now... i'm struggling.

but i try my hardest to keep my eyes forward because i've made it through before and i can do it again. i have days where i lay in bed and cry. i have days where my anxiety is so bad i can't walk into my lecture halls or finish homework. i have days where i have to keep myself from driving my car into trees because it just seems easier. those days are hard.

but then i have days where i hang out with my mom and i'm happy. or i sit at home and watch netflix and i'm happy. or i write twenty pages and i feel like i'm invincible and i'm happy. i hang out with friends or go see a movie or do things that make me happy and i know i can keep going because i'll have those moments.

i don't have a mike. in fact my "ah ha" moment came after my first relationship ended back in high school and i felt so unlovable and worthless. and then i saw how other people still loved me and i realized i could love myself because of who i was. i like myself for the most part and no one can change that.

so even on the bad days, the lonely days, i know i'll be okay. i know i'll find my person some day who understands me like mike understands el. i'll just keep waiting. it'll be worth it.

anyways that's mushy and sappy but i wanted you all to know that i love and appreciate all of you and i'm so thankful for each and every kudos and comment and person who stopped to let me know that. this hasn't been the easiest to write but at the same time i'm so glad i did. thanks for believing in el and mike and thanks for believing in me too.

see you soon!

-g

## 22. You put your arms around me and I'm home

### Notes for the Chapter:

THIS GOT TOO LONG AND I DON'T LOVE HOW I ENDED IT BUT I'M SO HAPPY TO FINALLY GET IT OUT.

i'm so sorry i said it would be out before season 2 but it wasn't and now i'm consumed with writing as many mileven season 2 one shots as possible aaAAHHH BUT I FINISHED THIS.

i'm the saltiest fish in the fucking sea that changed roman's name to kali but i get it but also i hate it because now my story sounds stupid lmao whATEVER DUFFERS WHATEVER.

um... it's super fucking long because i kept trying to end it and then more cute shit would happen and just aahhhhh i love my kids and i want them to be happy and they are but i'm still emotional.

but yeah. sorry. i'm a liar. someone should fight me.

The sun was filling up the room with warm sunshine, a cozy beam heating up Mike's face and with a snuffled snort he turned his head, not wanting to wake up yet. There was something soft and silky wrapped around his calf and he shifted, his fingers skidding across warm, bare skin.

There was a soft huff and he blinked his eyes open slowly, looking down at the familiar body tangled up with his, strands of honey-brown hair spread across the pillow they were sharing and tickling his neck and chest. Her arms were crushed between their chests, her leg wrapped firmly around his as she slept and he couldn't help but smile, remembering the night before.

El looked peaceful, her eyebrows twitching as he shifted and moved her. He reached out and tucked one of the messy strands back behind

her ear, watching as she murmured something too soft to understand, and then sighed, leaning forward into his touch. She always leaned into him, even when she was sleeping.

*God, I love her so fucking much*, he thought, watching her lip twitch as he gently stroked her hair.

Glancing around the room he realized they'd left the blinds open and sighed. That's why there was so much bright sunshine in their small bedroom, which they liked to keep dark in the mornings. It was a tiny space, their full size mattress and shared dresser barely fitting in with the two side tables. And the closet... he didn't even want to get started on how small that was. But however tiny... he would never complain. Because it was *theirs*.

He glanced at the analog alarm clock behind her on the side table, reading the time and deciding it was good he'd woken up. They couldn't be late today.

"El," he whispered, tracing her face with his fingers gently. "Hey, you need to wake up."

A soft squeak of protest as her eyes fluttered.

"Fuck off," she mumbled, swatting his hand away.

He grinned. She was in a good mood this morning. Which made sense after the previous night.

"Come on, El. You have something big to do today."

"If you're referring to *yourself*," she huffed, voice muffled by the pillow, "you can go suck an egg."

He laughed. That was a new one.

"Suck an egg?"

"A *raw* one."

"Okay, well, I just thought you would want to get up since you graduate today—"

She sat bolt upright, forgetting she was naked, and then covered herself with the sheet, turning to him with wide eyes, mouth dropping open, her hair still half in her face and the rest sticking up wildly. Had she really forgotten? He smiled.

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news.”

“What time is it?”

“Seven forty-five. You’re supposed to be at the stadium at nine. You can relax a little bit,” he teased, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her back down onto the bed. “Maybe even let me cuddle you. I feel like I’ve earned it, you know, since you wore me out last night.”

“But I have to—”

“Five more minutes?” he begged and she sighed.

“Okay, fine. Only because I’m tired as heck. Why did you keep me up all night when you knew I had something important to get up early for?” she complained as he spooned her again, his nose snuffling her hair.

“Hey, the second time was all you. I was tired. *You* jumped *me*,” he protested, refusing to take the blame for that one.

“Ugh, god, I hate it when you’re right,” she huffed and then sighed. “You just look so cute when you’re all sweaty and your hair is all crazy.”

“What? Really?” He grinned even though she couldn’t see it. “Should I start working out or something? Start coming home all sweaty and messed up?”

“Pfft,” she scoffed. “You can barely run. I doubt you’ll workout.”

“You’re making me want to try.”

She was laughing despite herself and he snuggled her closer, pressing kisses to the back of her neck and feeling her shiver, her hand reaching back to cup his cheek. As much as she protested and teased,



he knew she loved him. Her confession on the rooftop all those years ago hadn't been a lie.

It had been almost three years to the day since then and so much had changed. She had gone home with him to Hawkins that first summer and every summer after. His mom had been ecstatic that he had a girlfriend and had done up Nancy's old room so El would feel at home, his dad seemingly pleased with his choice since El laughed at every lame joke at the dinner table and enjoyed his rather unhelpful, fatherly advice. She'd never really had a dad before. His mom had been intense but El matched her intensity and soon both found a mutual comfortable space. Both of his sisters liked her too and for the first time she'd had an entire family.

Towards the end of that first summer she'd broken down and cried in his arms, confessing just how much she was going to miss them when they went back to school. She hadn't known family could be like that.

And she'd found a job, waiting tables at the local diner, Benny's Burgers. The owner, Benny, had known Mike for a while and had taken an immediate liking to El. She didn't let people skip on the bill and never took anyone's shit, making friends with the regulars and learning the pace of diner quickly. Her tip jar was soon overflowing and she smiled as she stashed the money away.

For an apartment, she'd told him, one she could keep if she found a job during the school year. Max's scholarship kept her in the dorm and El had been nervously trying to find a roommate, since the apartment would be cheaper to split. But she didn't really like the idea of living with a potential stranger and he could tell. It had given him an idea.

"What if—" He'd paused, hoping he wasn't being too forward. "I mean, I could afford it. I make enough over the summer and my TA job is mostly just so I have spending money during the year." He blinked at her stunned face. "Would you want to live, like... together?"

"You want to live with me?"

"Is that crazy?" He'd shook his head. "It's crazy, sorry, way too soon

again. Maybe some other—”

She'd tackled him onto the couch they were on and kissed him so hard he'd had to gasp for breath, looking down at him excitedly. An obvious yes. Way better than living with a stranger.

So that fall, his final year of college, they'd moved into the tinyass apartment they were still in now, filling the space with old, secondhand furniture and inviting their friends over on the weekends to watch movies or the new episode of Game of Thrones. The couch oftentimes had a drunken occupant sleeping off their hangover but they didn't mind. It had become their home for the past two years and he was excited for wherever they went next.

Which was had been stressing her out.

“Max is probably going to call you,” he mumbled against her ear, still holding her.

“I know, I made sure my phone was on the charger. We're going to sit together since we're not allowed to march together,” she rolled her eyes. “Such a stupid rule. Why do I have to walk with another psychology major? I don't even know the guy. Max seriously almost punched the academic dean in the face when he told her that.”

“She would have.”

“Mmhm. But I wasn't about to let her kicked out two days before we graduate.”

Max was done too, already hired by a local high school to coach volleyball and teach P.E. She still lived in the dorms but practically lived at the apartment Dustin had nearby. Mike had been right, he didn't go back to Hawkins, choosing to stay in the cozy college town and wait for his girlfriend to graduate.

“When are your parents getting here?”

“They probably already left so... maybe in an hour? I'm not sure, I haven't checked my phone.”

“Are they coming here? To the apartment?” She sat up a bit and

turned to look at him.

“Nah, they’ll head straight to the stadium and get good seats. Holly’s coming too, she was excited to see you.”

His little sister was eight years younger than him, meaning she was seventeen and basically worshipped El, saying she was the only person who actually understood her. El was angsty and Holly was angsty and Mike always rolled his eyes as he threw El the car keys so they could go shopping and get coffee and bitch about life. It was good for both of them, he’d decided.

But he loved that his family loved her as much as he did and she seemed to blossom more and more as she spent Thanksgiving and Christmas with them every year. Max would come to Hawkins too, and stay with Dustin and his mother during breaks and all six of the friends would hang out and get drunk in the Wheeler’s basement and play video games or watch movies or just talk about life, sprawled in the chairs that still surrounded their old D&D table.

It was as close to perfect as they could get.

“Okay, I need to get up and take a shower.”

“Nooooo,” he whined. “I’m comfy.” He squeezed her with his arms. “And cozy. You don’t need to graduate today. I did it. It’s overrated.”

He’d received his bachelor’s of science in Physics and Biology with a Creative Writing minor two years earlier, hoping to get a master’s and teaching certification. He wanted to be a college professor and write on the side but currently worked part time at a local lab as a nanotechnician assistant and part time on campus under his previous employer (Dr. McNeill) as tutor for science classes. It was good experience even though he didn’t love nanotechnology bit. He preferred more hypothetical research was starting to build a thesis on wormholes and alternate dimensions.

But it made enough to pay the bills and buy enough ramen to live on and while El worked part time as a grader for the head of Human Development department, they were still on the poorer side. They didn’t care since they had each other. And after the first year when

Lucas bought El a waffle iron for her birthday it didn't matter. Waffle batter was cheap.

"I need that diploma, Mike. And I need to find a real job. And get into a master's program and graduate again," she sounded suddenly stressed. "Have you checked the mail today?"

"Do you *think* I've checked the mail?" he teased, trying to lighten the mood but failing.

She rolled away from him and he tried to grab for her but missed. She smiled triumphantly as she stood up, grabbing her robe from where it hung on the bed frame and wrapping it around herself. He whined, reaching out for her like a child would, and she turned back crossing her arms, eyebrow quirked.

"I'm going to shower and if you quit being a baby you can join me," she smirked, forgetting her stress and going over to the dresser to grab clean underwear. "Save water or whatever your bullshit excuse is."

"It *does* save water! It's scientifically proven!" he protested.

"Okay, Mr. Science, come and take a shower with me so I'm not late to my graduation ceremony."

He flailed suddenly as she gave him that grin that meant good things, almost falling off the bed and chasing after her into the bathroom. It was soon filled with the sound laughing and they messed around until the hot water turned cold and they had to get out, drying off.

She put on makeup and fixed her hair as he headed for the kitchen to make breakfast. Coffee and waffles as usual, though El was always coming up with new flavors to try and Mike had soon learned the art. Shaking some sprinkles onto the chocolate chip and strawberry waffle he'd cooked up, he set it on the table as she walked in.

He blinked, stunned by how she pretty she looked when she did herself up, pouty lips soft and pink, her eyes lined and made bigger with swipes of mint eyeshadow. Her hair had dried into it's usual waves, her baby hairs curling against her forehead and she blew a

strand out of her face as she looked at him.

“What?” she asked, that damn eyebrow quirking and he had to resist the urge to pick her up and throw her over the shoulder and head back to their bedroom. If he messed up her hair and makeup she would be actually pissed and instead he sighed.

“Nothing. Here.”

She sat down at the tiny, two-person table as he went and grabbed the whipped-cream covered waffle creation and set it down in front of her, grabbing his own sprinkle-less waffles and sitting down across from her. Her usual amused smile curved her lips and she looked at him, eyes soft. He cleared his throat.

“You get a special waffle since it’s a special day,” he explained.

“Sprinkles make it special?”

“Yes.”

“Perfect. I love it.”

She shoveled it down hungrily, giving him a gross, thankful, chewed waffle-filled smile. So far she’d seemed unworried and he felt relieved. He had been unsure whether or not she’d be anxious today. Graduation was a huge event, with tons of people and a spotlight as each student walked across the stage. It was the kind of thing that set off her social anxiety, or even her general anxiety, but she had been getting better and didn’t seem bothered at all. He reached across the table and snagged her hand, rubbing her knuckles with his thumb lightly.

“Wha?” she asked, her mouth full.

“Nothing. Just proud of you.”

She snorted through her waffle. “Why?”

“Because you’re amazing. Just accept it.”

“Hmph.”

His phone buzzed and he picked it up, checking the texts from his mom. They'd left early like he thought and would be there in an hour. There was also a text from Holly asking if El would like a jean jacket as graduation present. He texted back a "yes" and a smiling emoji and then set his phone down and finished his food.

It was comfortably quiet between them and she checked her own phone as she ate, reading the excited messages from Max and then checking her social media. She'd never really had it before but she'd given in and made a Facebook and an Instagram and a Snapchat, finding herself enjoying seeing what other people were doing in their lives. So far she hadn't posted a lot, the occasional picture of her and Mike or just Mike. She had a habit of snapping pictures of him when he wasn't paying attention and he would have hated it if she didn't seem so happy.

She had opened up to other people too. Making friends with her lab partner and a girl she sat next to in class. It wasn't like with Max or Mike's friends, but occasionally she would get coffee or study with them and he liked how she was starting to branch out just a little bit.

She checked her email again, sighing as there were no new messages. For the past few months she'd been waiting on acceptance letters from a few different universities for their master's programs. It would determine where they went after this, where they would end up, a new city, a new home. Anxiety tickled her stomach and she swallowed it, not wanting to let it ruin her day. It wasn't something she needed to think about yet.

"Staring at it won't make it happen."

Mike was smirking at her knowingly, holding up his last bite of waffle.

"Have you heard anything from the ones you applied to?"

"Nope. But it's still early. Fall enrollment has barely started," he shrugged before taking his bite. "I'm sure we'll hear something soon."

"Easy for you to say. You like your job," she huffed. "I want to be able to actually help people and I need my master's for that."

“Have you started looking for another job? Your adult job?” he teased.

“Sort of. I just.... don’t know where to look. Or what to do,” she sighed. “I’m not doing food service. Or working at the mall.”

“What about the bookstore near east campus? With the cats?” he suggested casually.

“Are they hiring?”

“I think so. They had a sign up last week.”

She almost jumped up and ran out of the apartment.

“What?! Why didn’t you tell me!? I *love* that place!”

He grinned sheepishly. “I forgot, honestly. They’re closed today, why don’t you go on Monday?”

“If they haven’t already hired someone...”

“I’m sure they haven’t. Have a little faith, babe.”

She glared for a second but shoved her last bite of food in her mouth and headed back to the bedroom, quickly changing into the blush pink dress she’d picked out for the day. It was soft, with off the shoulder sleeves and a ruffy skirt, a pair of silver sandals on her feet. Comfortable and not too hot, since she had to sit in a black robe in the sun for three hours. Short sleeves—or a lack of sleeves—were a must.

Her scars slowly stopped bothering her after the first year or of dating. The fear had melted, her sleeves and skirts slowly getting shorter, the anxiety at the stares that followed her fading as he kissed her and reassured her and helped her realize she didn’t need to be ashamed. Now she barely thought about them, the things she’d once detested, the things that made her hate her own body, had become battle scars. Proof of the darkness she’d walked through and come out of *alive* .

And when the doubts and fears swept in he was always there to kiss

each ridge and line and remind her that nothing could ever keep her from deserving love.

“Where did you get that dress?” He raised an eyebrow, going to her and pulling her close. “I don’t think I’ve seen it before.”

“Your sister sent it to me.”

“Holly?” He scrunched up his brow.

“No, Nancy. She said it was graduation present, since she couldn’t make it.”

Mike grabbed her hand and twirled her, smiling as she giggled and let herself be spun in dizzy circles, almost tripping over her own feet. He caught her waist and pulled her in to his chest, pressing a kiss to her soft brown waves. They were getting longer, falling down her back like a honey-brown waterfall. She still smelled like peaches, having found a solid supplier of the shampoo he loved so much. Sometimes he’d use a bit so he could smell like her during the day.

“My sisters have good taste.” He frowned, suddenly serious. “Never tell them I said that.”

“No promises,” she teased as she headed for the small living room.

It had enough room for a squishy, old couch and loveseat, the TV barely fitting onto the wall between the bookshelves covered in Lord of the Rings and Star Wars memorabilia. They’d started a collection of figurines and replicas, Mike’s nerdiness rubbing off on her enough that she would occasionally splurge. It was giant nerdhouse and sometimes she jokingly mourned how far she’d fallen.

“You know, when Max first said I was going on a double date I told her that whoever she was trying to set me up with better not be a huge nerd,” she would sigh. “And now look at me.”

“You’re my nerd queen now.”

“Nerd *queen*?”

“My nerd queen. You know you love it.”



She'd laughed at him so hard she'd choked on her spit.

"Where are the keys?" she asked, interrupting his memory. "I need to go."

He tossed them towards her and she caught them without looking, pulling her cap and gown out of the closet in the tiny hallway, the only place they'd fit. She was picking up Max and driving them down so they could get there early like they were supposed to and line up. Dustin was picking up Mike since they didn't have to be there until later, but he felt a pang watching her head towards the door.

He always hated watching her leave.

"I'll see you after the ceremony, text me where you guys are sitting and I'll try and find you after I walk," she sauntered over to him where he was still sitting at the table and went to kiss his cheek.

He turned his head so their lips met instead and felt her jolt in surprise but give in, leaning down and sighing against him. There was no way he would ever tire of kissing her. No way in hell.

She pulled back and shook her head at him, her lips curving up.

"I'll see you soon," she teased. "Try not to be so needy."

"But I do need you. All the time. Every second."

She rolled her eyes with a snort. "You're hopeless. I'm leaving."

But she was smiling still, his words always making her smirk and shake her head. He liked to remind her to an obnoxious degree, just how much he loved her. It was something she hadn't always had and as much as she teased and insulted, he knew she loved it. Like she loved him.

The door shut and she was gone, leaving him with the dishes. He didn't mind. Technically he was less stressed since she was the student with the homework so he did a lot of the housework, like his mom had taught him. Sometimes El would come back from class and catch him in his pair of yellow gloves and apron, mopping the floor and scrubbing the bathroom. He would always get a kiss of gratitude,

no matter how tired or stressed she was.

Living together had been surprisingly easily. They were both fairly clean and neat, keeping the apartment from being garbage pit and deep cleaning when necessary. She was the better cook, though, and he ate a lot of ramen when she was too tired. Ramen and waffles. And eggs, which he always made sure they had. Sometimes she would bring him leftovers from the caf at school and his mom still sent cookies and cakes and he never found himself hungry or unhappy.

He had left up the seat up a few times and earned a few ear-scathing scoldings after she'd blindly tried to pee in the middle of the night. Those had been fun nights on the couch. And of course the occasional argument, where they would scream until they were too tired to care and she would crawl on top of him and cry and they would have make up sex. Which was always *awesome*. Sometimes he would wish for a good argument just for that... but also hated when they fought.

In some ways they were a typical couple dealing with typical couple things... but then he would find her on the days when the darkness weighed too heavy and remember why they were different.

Sometimes she would just end up on the floor, curled up in a ball, usually by the front door. Those were the worst ones. The first time had freaked him out and he'd had to call Max, El's lack of response worrying him. Her best friend had told him what to do, what she had always done, and he'd cautiously carried his girlfriend to their bed and laid her down. Helped her change into pajamas and then curled up with her, cuddling her tightly to him as she cried and sobbed and told him how much she was sorry. It always broke his heart but he tried to be strong for her.

If it wasn't too bad she would eventually uncurl and sit up and he would make her something to eat and put on a movie, cuddling her on the couch and helping to distract her from her own mind until she was strong enough again to face it. Other days he'd have to just tuck her into bed, holding her until she fell asleep, hoping the morning would bring a better light. But he never tired of her, like he promised, taking care of her until she could smile again. It was just part of her and he had known that from the beginning.

There was a knock on the door and he looked up, surprised that Dustin was so early. He was never early. But Mike stood and went to the door, opening it and then blinking at the face that was definitely not Dustin.

“Um, hello. Is... Eleven here?”

It was some lady he'd never seen before, in her early thirties with dark skin and hair and large brown eyes. Something about her seemed familiar but he had no idea who she was and he was sure he'd never seen her before.

“No, she had to head out early,” he licked his lips, hoping he wasn't being rude. “Um, who are you?”

“Oh, right. I'm Roman. Her... sister.”

Something clicked in his brain and he immediately warmed. This was the sister that had helped El after the gala. He hadn't heard a whole lot about her since then, but he knew El kept in contact with her.

“Oh. Yeah, she's mentioned you.” He stuck his hand out. “I'm Mike, her boyfriend.”

A smile teased her serious face as she shook his hand.

“You're Mike? She said you were tall but she wasn't kidding.”

“Heh, yeah, it's a blessing and a curse. Did you want me to call El or something? If you need to talk to her—”

“No, that's alright. It was supposed to be surprise but I have to leave in an hour, so I can't make the ceremony. I wanted to give her this,” she said, holding out an official looking envelope. “It's part of the settlement from our father.”

“Settlement?” He furrowed his brow, not knowing what she was talking about.

“From the abuse case?” Roman looked confused too. “Did Eleven not tell you?”

“No...”

“Maybe she didn’t want to worry you,” she shrugged. “I’d gathered evidence of abuse at his estate from when I lived there but El gave several testimonies and evidence too. He’s no longer allowed to adopt children and he had to pay quite a bit for the settlement. Unfortunately he weaseled out of jail time but I thought this might lessen the sting.”

He took it, looking down at the heavy white paper, feeling confused and a little hurt. Why hadn’t El told him? This was big, life changing even, and it wasn’t like her to keep secrets from him. They didn’t tell each other every little thing but this was a big one.

“Wow... that’s great, I mean, him not being able to adopt anymore,” Mike managed to get out.

“It is. Apparently he had been looking for more children after Eleven left him three years ago. He was looking out of country but now the courts will block him if he tries. It’s good. No child will have to deal with him by themselves again.”

“Cool, um, I mean... awesome. I hope he chokes,” he said rather vehemently and then flushed in embarrassment. “S-Sorry.”

“No, I can agree with that sentiment,” Roman smiled and somehow it reminded him of El.

There was an awkward pause and she stepped back, smoothing her navy skirt and blazer, looking official. Mike glanced over his shoulder.

“Did you want to come in? There’s still coffee in the pot.”

“I shouldn’t, I have to leave. But if you could give her that...”

“I’ll make sure she gets it,” he assured.

There was an awkward pause, like neither quite knew what to say in the situation.

“I’m proud of her,” the older woman said suddenly. “I never talked to

her much when she was little which was a mistake. I saw her as a replacement for me, a rival. But she had it even worse than I did and I know it's too late to try and make up for that but I'm glad she has you know."

"Um," he blinked.

"I know what you did for her. Thank you. She's always been strong. Stronger than me."

"She's a fighter for sure."

"Take care of her, Mike."

"I... I will," he thought of the secret hiding on the top shelf in one of the cupboards. "I'm not letting her go anytime soon."

"Good," Roman nodded, then stepped back. "I'm sure I'll see you both again sometime."

"Yeah, sure. Thanks again."

"See you, Mike."

"Bye, Roman."

She turned and headed down the hallway and he shut the door, looking down at the envelope, feeling an itch to open it. But he wouldn't, it was El's, and instead set it on the counter before going over to the cupboard. He'd be more upset at her secret if he didn't have his own.

Opening the cupboard he reached, back into the corner behind cans of okra—which he knew she hated—where her small frame couldn't see or reach. Grabbing the small box he pulled it out and looked down, opening the lid and staring.

It was a ring. Rose gold with a tiny pearl. Her favorite color was pink and he hoped she wouldn't mind that he couldn't quite afford diamonds. He'd bought it during the second summer, after his own graduation, but had it hidden for the last two years, waiting. Not because he didn't love her, but he because he was nervous.

Marriage was big. A huge commitment. Would she want that?

And he was afraid, that it would be too much. Too big. More than she would want with him. He knew without a doubt she loved him but... what if she didn't love him enough? It was stupid and irrational but it had kept the ring out of sight.

Today something felt different. Today she was graduating and Brenner was officially gone and things were going to change. They would have to move once she was accepted into a master's program, find new jobs, start all over. None of that really scared him but he wanted that certainty, that no matter what happened or where they went she would be by his side... forever.

Closing the box he tucked it into his pocket, feeling his heart speed up. Today was the day. He could just tell.

He put the envelope in his other pocket and then went into the bedroom to put on a nice button-up shirt, sure his mother would scold him if he showed up in the old X-Men one he'd been wearing. There was another knock on the door and then it opened and he heard Dustin walk in, talking loudly on the phone to someone about a marching band.

"—or it's going to be ruined. Got it? Okay. Cool, bye. Thanks again."

"Dustin who are you talking to?"

"No one important," his friend grinned as he walked into the kitchen, helping himself to the last bit of the coffee. "You ready?"

"To go? Yeah."

He took in his friend's appearance, frowning at the three piece, cherry red suit Dustin was currently wearing.

What.

"Um—"

"No questions, my friend. Let's go."

“But you’re—Am I underdressed?” Mike asked.

“Nah. Don’t worry about it. Come on.”

He decided it would be more difficult to try and pry an answer from Dustin, shaking his head and following him out to the car. The short drive was quiet and he texted his mom to find out where they were sitting, finding his family fairly easily in the crowd. His dad had his arms crossed, leaning back in his seat and snoring softly as his mom fussed with Holly’s long blonde hair as she tried to slap her mother’s hands away. She looked up when they approached.

“Mike, honey, there you are. I was afraid you’d be late.”

“It doesn’t start for another fifteen minutes, Mom,” he snorted. “How long have you been here?”

“An hour,” Holly said sulkily, shoving her earbuds into her ears and blocking them out.

“Is that why dad is sleeping?”

“He drove the whole way, I’ll wake him up when El appears,” his mother shrugged, then changed her focus. “Hello, Dustin. That’s... quite a suit.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler,” he grinned, not offering any explanation.

The ceremony started, the graduates marching in wearing their long black robes and taking their seats at the front. Some d-list famous businessman gave a speech about never letting go of your dreams that sounded similar to the one Mike had sweat through when he’d graduated. That had been a good day, his and El’s one year anniversary funnily enough, and he’d picked her up by her waist and spun her around after she found him in the crowd, smiling as she laughed merrily.

He hadn’t been able to spot her yet but his mom was still looking, holding her camera ready. He could tell El’s graduation picture would end up on the mantle at home next to his and Nancy’s.

Soon enough they started handing out diplomas, the names in

alphabetical order, the major and minor and honors of each student read out loud for the entire world to hear. El's last name was still Brenner so they didn't have to wait long. She hated it and he knew it, hoping it might be one of the factors that might convince her to become a Wheeler for good.

"Jane Theresa Brenner—Bachelor of Science in Psychology. Summa cum laude," the academic dean read out loud.

She'd kept her 4.0 with Mike's help and now had highest honors, smiling awkwardly as she crossed the stage and shook hands with the president, taking her diploma. From beside him Holly whistled loudly, his dad waking up long enough to let out a "woohoo!" as his mother wiped a tear from her eye. He let himself cheer too, noticing how she glanced towards them, recognizing his voice through the crowd.

Their eyes met and she smiled, less awkwardly and more sincerely this time, and he felt his heart skip a bit.

*I totally want to marry her.*

They had to wait a bit to get to the M's, so Max could be announced and Dustin pulled out an air horn, scaring everyone around them and nearly getting himself kicked out. His mother, as much as she loved Max, hadn't been able to make it out and clearly he was trying to make up for it. She hadn't spoken to her own family since she'd been stabbed, but Dustin's mom with her boisterous attitude and upbeat presence made it easy for her to forget and she always loved visiting.

And she always had El too.

They still had sleepovers and classes together and even though they spent a lot of time with their boys they didn't forget each other. How could they? They were sisters.

After Max crossed the stage and picked up her diploma it was just about waiting until everyone sat back down. They announced the new class and year and Mike had to shield himself and Holly from the hundreds of pointy-cornered caps that went sailing into the air. He wandered through the crowd, looking for the face that he knew



would be shining with excitement.

“Mike!”

Her hands wrapped around his waist from behind, clutching her diploma, which dug into his ribs as she hugged him. Twisting around he grabbed her and leaned down to kiss her, smiling against her lips and feeling like his chest would burst with pride.

“I did it!” she crowed.

“You did it,” he agreed, kissing her again. “I knew you could.”

“But you helped me. I wouldn’t have this without you.”

“And I wouldn’t have anything without you,” he murmured back, pushing a strand of her hair from her eyes.

His family was still being jostled somewhere in the crowd and it felt like they were alone, the other circles of people shutting them out so it was just the two of them staring at each other. The colors sharpened, the grass greener, her smile brighter, and his pocket suddenly felt like it weighed a ton.

*I want to marry her.*

His fingers went down, to his pocket, sneaking into the fabric and—

*Fweeeeeeeet!*

They both startled, looking towards the edge of the stadium where the whistle had blown. It sounded again and El stood on her toes, trying to see where it was coming from, the entire crowd of gowned graduates turning to see what the commotion was. Mike squinted, noticing a figure in red. Was that....?

There was the sound of drums, an entire drumline actually, and the college marching band appeared, walking out of the tunnel as the brass section blared. Mike blinked, his arm still around El’s waist, stunned. It sounded like they were playing... Pour Some Sugar On Me?

Why did that song seem important?

“Mike, is that Dustin? Is he in a red suit?”

“Yeah...” He was still puzzled.

“He’s wearing her favorite color and he has the marching band playing her favorite song?” El looked at him, eyebrow raised. “Is this a proposal?”

Mike felt himself break out in a sweat, suddenly speechless. What the fuck was going on. How did she know that—

El dragged him through the mob of curious people until they were close enough to see. It was in fact Dustin leading them, holding up a baton and marching to the beat, leading the band closer, his red suit making him a beacon. As they got closer they moved, spelling out the word “MAX” and Mike felt El shaking, looking down and realizing she was laughing. But she was right, this was ridiculous.

A lone figure in a black robe and cap wandered out, meeting Dustin in the middle, the long, red hair making it clear it was Max. They seemed to be talking, but were too far away for Mike to make out the expressions on their faces.

“She’s either going to love it or kick his ass,” El mumbled. “But if he proposes and it’s not just a stunt then she’ll probably love it.”

“You think?”

“She loves him a lot. Even when he’s ridiculous.”

Dustin went down on one knee, fumbling a bit and dropping the box. He didn’t get the chance to pick it back up as Max tackled him to the ground and started kissing him, making the answer fairly obvious. The band stopped playing and started clapping, the crowd of parents and graduates joining in, cheering loudly for the clearly very happy couple.

“Wow,” El breathed from beside him. “That’s cute as fuck.”

He felt his heart sinking. She liked this kind of thing? There was no

way he could just whip out the ring now. Not after that... he should have planned something. Something big and spectacular and worthy of her. To show her how much he loved her.

With a sigh he took his hand out of his pocket. Maybe some other day.

"Mike, aren't you happy? You look like they just drop-kicked an entire litter of puppies," she scowled a bit, surprised at his frown.

"Oh, no that's super awesome! I had no clue he was going to do that. Any of it."

"Really?"

"He kept a secret for once," he smirked. "He must really love her."

"They're good for each other," she agreed.

Max and Dustin got back up, dusting themselves off and started walking back towards the crowd, holding hands and receiving more cheers and whistles. They looked happy, almost glowing and Mike sighed, deciding he he would figure out something that would be special enough for El.

"Mike?"

"Hm?"

He looked down at her, noticing her lopsided grimace.

"If you ever propose to me like that I'll chuck the ring and run away."

"What?" The breath left his lungs.

"Don't ever do something like that. For the love of God."

"You said it was cute?" He felt confused.

"I mean, for *them*. That's something Dustin would do. But I would have murdered him in front of everyone and run away." It occurred to her that she was talking about marriage and she furrowed her

brow and bit her lip. “Shit, sorry, is that a weird thing to talk about?” she squirmed. “Just thought it was relevant after...” she gestured towards the marching band that had started playing again. “All of *that*.”

“But you would—”

“Be okay with marrying you some day? Of course, Mike. You may not have figured this out but I kind of like you a lot. And I hate my last name anyways. Wheeler would be *such* an improvement,” she teased, eyes dancing. “But no rush.”

She walked past him, to go to her friend and congratulate her, but he reached out and caught her wrist, whirling her back around. His palms were suddenly sweating, his mouth dry, and he barely managed to sputter out two words as his wide, serious eyes met her confused ones.

“Marry me.”

Her brow furrowed and she blinked at him, like she wasn’t sure if she’d heard him right and he cleared his throat to try again.

“Marry me, El.”

It wasn’t a question so much as a statement but he’d succeeded in getting her attention, her expression going from confused to surprised. Letting her go he reached for his pocket, pulling out the velvet box and popping it open, showing her the tiny ring.

“I won’t get a marching band if you say yes,” he grinned impishly and then got down on his knee, looking up at her. “Is that a fair deal?”

“M-Mike,” she gasped, her eyes widening to an almost comical degree.

“I love you, El. You could say I like you a lot. So please... will you marry me?”

She whispered something, her voice too quiet to hear over the sound of the marching band still playing and the people around them

talking and he felt a bead of sweat slide down his spine. A bolt of nervousness flashed through him.

“What did you say?” he licked his lips. “It’s kind of loud, um—”

Suddenly he was on his back, gasping for air, her weight on his chest as she pressed kisses all over his face. There was a gasp from the people around them and then she pulled back, looking down at him with tear-filled eyes.

“I said yes, you deaf idiot,” she was grinning widely. “Of course I’ll marry you.”

“Really?”

“Why would I say no? I sure as hell don’t want you to get that band to come over here.”

Her eyes were dancing and then she kissed him on the lips so passionately he gasped again, setting his hands on her waist and then moving her off of him with a grunt. She was sitting on his gut and it kind of hurt and as happy as he was he wanted to look her in the face and not be in pain. They both sat up.

“So you’re saying yes? You want to get married?”

“I said yes like three times by now. Gimme the fucking ring I want to rub it all over my face,” she pecked his cheek, lowering her voice. “I kind of want to rub you all over my face too.”

“El, my parents are right there,” he coughed.

They were actually, and he was pretty sure his mom had never looked more confused in her life, staring down at her son and his girlfriend who were in a puddle on the ground. She opened her mouth to ask the obvious question.

“We’re getting married,” Mike blurted before she could say anything.

There were three different voices from three different directions as Max and Dustin came up from behind them and his parents closed in from the front.

“What?”

“You are?”

“*What?!*”

Mike’s hands were shaking but he managed to get the box open, pulling the ring out and sliding it onto El’s finger as she sniffled happily. For a second he stared at her hand and the tiny promise that wrapped around her finger, before looking up at her beaming face, noticing the tears and realizing he had similar ones in his eyes.

*I get to marry her.*

“I... there’s going to be a wedding?” His mother gasped excitedly, looking between the two who were still sitting on the grass. “You want a wedding, right?”

“Ellie!” Max shrieked, reaching down and pulling her friend up and away from Mike. “We’re getting married!”

Any other friend might have been pissed at them for stealing the thunder, but Max looked ecstatic for her friend. And it it was kind of impossible to steal the thunder from a marching band proposal anyways. The two young women held out their hands and cooed at each other’s rings. Max had a simple gold band with tiny rubies around her diamond, considerably larger than El’s pearl and rose gold statement, which made sense.

Dustin’s startup tech company had taken off and he’d ended up selling it two years later for a rather large amount of money, smartly investing in more businesses and starting more companies. Out of the four friends he and Lucas, who was currently enjoying the Florida sunshine at NASA, were tied for most successful. If there was anyone who could take care of Max for the rest of her life... it was Dustin.

And she loved him, something Mike was never quite able to completely understand but respected.

El didn’t seemed disappointed in the slightest with her ring and the sister-friends hugged tightly. They’d made it through a lot, just the two of them, and now they were taking new steps that would move

take them even further apart... but they weren't sad.

"So, we're going to have double ceremony, right?" Max grinned.

El snorted a laugh. "Of course. With matching dresses and bouquets?"

"We can dance down the aisle to Forever by Chris Brown, like in the Office."

"And Dustin and Mike can wear white tuxedos. With tails. And top hats."

The aforementioned future grooms exchanged a concerned, if not nervous, look.

"Um, El—" Mike started.

"What if we had glowstick bouquets instead of flowers? Like it could be a rave-themed wedding where everyone just dances the whole time?" El's face was serious as she ignored her new fiancé.

"And blacklights!" Max agreed. "With neon dresses so they glow! You can wear pink, of course. Do they have neon red?"

"Instead of lighting a candle we take unity shots together and have like one of those DJ guys who makes EDM officiate from the booth."

Max shot Dustin a look. "Do you think we could afford Skrillex?"

"Uh."

"Mike, do I need to wear a dress or would like one of those rave outfits with angel wings and a light up bra be okay?" El's face was still serious and he blinked.

"El, please—" he begged.

The two girls burst out laughing, realizing everyone was taking them too seriously. Max shook her head as El cackled and fell back against Mike, her hand sliding up his shoulder reassuringly.

"We're kidding, guys. Chill. I just want to go to Vegas," Max looked

at Dustin, eyebrow quirked up. "Can we get an Elvis to do it?"

"Of course, babe. Who else would marry us in Vegas?" He looked more excited at that idea and Mike realized they were serious about eloping.

He somehow wasn't surprised and El didn't seem upset either, laughing and making a joke about Elvis. He noticed the way his mother looked between them nervously, like she was afraid they'd suddenly run off and elope too.

"I'll book the tickets when you're ready," Dustin was saying, wrapping his arm around his new fiancée. "Maybe next week?"

"Can we move first? I want to get my shit unpacked."

Mike glanced at El and realized she looked as shocked as he felt. Neither of them knew so it must be a new development. Moving?

"Move where?" she asked.

"Dustin bought a house," Max was glowing. "It's small but it's a house. A home, Ellie."

Where there would be no fires or flying fists or broken glass shattering in the night. A home like the one El had with Mike. A safe place. Dustin looked even more pleased, holding up a set of keys as proof of what he'd done.

"You guys are welcome any time," he assured them.

"Congrats, man," Mike slapped his friend, genuinely happy. "That's so awesome, how long have you been saving for that?"

"A while. What about you guys? What are you two doing now that El's free?"

El's hand was in his, squeezing tightly, and despite how anxious he knew she'd been that morning about grad school... she looked calm. And happy. She smiled and shrugged, completely unbothered by the intimidating question.



"I dunno. I guess we'll keep waiting for an acceptance letter and get married."

"When were you thinking?" Karen Wheeler jumped in eagerly. "Fall weddings are nice if you like—"

"I was thinking spring..." El interrupted. "When the trees are covered in flowers, and the sunshine is warm. Maybe early April?" She gave her soon-to-be mother-in-law a sly smile. "Is that enough time to plan something small? I like pink."

"That's plenty of time," Karen assured her. "What shade of pink?"

"I—"

"Karen, can we do this over lunch?" His dad spoke up. "It's been awhile since breakfast."

"Oh, right. Wedding planning later, El. I have some ideas already."

His mom was almost giddy with excitement and he smiled, knowing she was going to be totally consumed with planning. He'd be worried about El if she wasn't so fierce, and he knew she would be able to stand her ground against things she didn't want. Her stubbornness drove him nuts but he knew it was one of the things that made her so strong.

They all started moving towards the exit arch, the stadium emptying, and El reached for his hand, unzipping her robe and sighing as cool air made its way inside. His family was faster and the two lagged behind, going slower and taking their time. He could feel the ring on her finger pressing against his palm and suddenly the reality of it hit him.

*I'm going to marry her.*

He froze and she almost jerked against his hand, turning to him as she stopped walking, looking confused.

"What's wrong?" her brow furrowed in concern at his serious face.

"You want to marry me."

She frowned. "That's wrong?"

"No!" He backtracked, shaking his head. "I just... I can't believe it. I mean, I can believe it but I..."

"It's just sinking in?"

"Yeah."

She didn't push or pull him, just standing there still holding his hand as he stared at her, letting it sink in the rest of the way. Sometimes he needed a bit of time and she understood that, waiting patiently.

This was his ultimate dream. He'd known for years that it was what he wanted. To have her with him forever, and while marriage wasn't something necessary for that... something about it made him want to jump up and down like a kid and yell and kiss her until he couldn't breathe. He was... *giddy*.

Something took him back to when he'd seen her for the first time.

He could still remember being so confused, feeling someone bounce off of him as he moved to sit in a chair. How fierce her scowl had been as she glowered up at him, how quickly she'd slapped her name onto the cushion of the seat and then sat down. He'd had no idea who she was but something about it had made him smile.

And then the look of contempt when she realized he was the supposed blind date. He would have done anything to convince her to go so he could spend more time with this suddenly fascinating girl. Keeping it from being a date, although he honestly wouldn't have minded, had been the obvious decision.

It had all spiraled from there, the mini golf disaster catapulting them past anything he could have expected or predicted. Her passion and dedication, her fierce self-preservation, her undying loyalty and odd quirks... and the way her hand had fit so easily into his made it impossible to resist.

But most of all it had been her smile.

She had different ones, smirks and grins and the fake expression that

broke his heart. The first one she'd given him, where her mouth had barely twitched up as he'd asked if she wanted a nickname for her nickname, had pulled him in. And then the flirty one as she walked away. He'd wanted to see her smile again, wanted to know what it was like for her to smile *just* for him.

Like she was now, her hazel-brown eyes warm and affectionate. In some ways she had saved him. He'd given up after high school, thinking maybe something was wrong with him. Girls only looked at him because of his height or because he could do their homework but didn't seem to care that much about who he was underneath. Or they thought he was too scrawny. Or that he was just a nerd.

But she'd seen him in his peak nerdy modes and at his worst, when he was angry, he was insecure and jealous... and she still wanted him. Sure, his problems seemed small compared to her constant battle, but it didn't make them any less relevant. She saw them, the messy bits of him, and still clung to him, still needing and wanting him despite his lack of perfection.

Even the pain he'd felt, seeing her in Lucas's lap, their hands on each other and lips touching and feeling the insecurity consume him... it hadn't canceled out his love for her. It had hurt so much because despite the betrayal every single cell in his body had still yearned for her.

When it came down to it he had decided they had to be soulmates, a concept he'd scoffed at in high school. There's nothing in science that can explain a soul, can explain how two people seem to be one, can seem destined for each other... but now he believed.

Looking down into her eyes, her smile lighting up her face... he couldn't not believe.

"El," he cupped her face in his hands and brought her close him. "I love you so much. Sometimes I think I'm crazy and it's too much and my heart is going to just burst... but I would let it. I would do anything if it meant I could still love you."

"Mike," she shook her head but smiled. "You're doing that thing again where you're all romantic. It's cute." She sobered. "But I get it.

Sometimes... I know it's been like three years and all of that is supposed to fade... but it doesn't with you. You still make me feel all mushy and gross."

"I make you feel gross," he stated flatly.

"Yeah. That's the best way I can describe it."

She always said something he didn't expect, but she didn't mean it the way most people would and trusted him to understand. He grinned.

"I'm so glad I make you feel gross. You make me feel absolutely disgusting."

"Oh no, what have I started," she groaned.

"Slimy? What's grosser, slimy or sticky?"

"Please, no, don't do this. I can't handle it."

"Fine, I'll take it easy today, since you decided to marry me."

She stood up on her toes and brought him down for a quick kiss.

He flashed back to their first kiss, after she'd talked about her depression and suicide attempt and had let him see the scars. They hadn't been disgusting but made his heart crack into tiny pieces, seeing the evidence of the pain she'd described. He'd held her as she cried, knowing some part of it was healing those wounds. And then her arms had been around his neck and he knew what was going to happen, giving in to her.

He'd always give into her.

"Of course I decided to marry you," she rolled her eyes again but softened, knowing it was hard for him to believe. "I love you, Mike."

"Say that again."

His voice was strained and he felt a sudden pang of emotion, pulling her to him and pressing his face against her temple, closing his eyes.

Sometimes he just had to remind himself that it was real. She had told him, a few months after they'd started dating, about the moment she'd had sitting on the floor staring at her dim reflection in the razor blade. How death had come to her again she'd let it drop to the floor because she wanted to live and she wanted to make things right. How he had been part of the reason she decided to keep living.

She hadn't reached that point since then but every now and then he felt the fear of losing her all over again. To death or to another man. It was the irrational bit of fear that she always calmed with a soft kiss and a shake of her head, one of the few things she took seriously and refused to joke about.

"I'm not going anywhere, Mike. I promised you that," her hand would press against his cheek as she pulled him closer. "It won't get that bad again. You help me and I'm better now than I've ever been. I'm staying here with you."

And he would sigh and let his body relax, slumping against her as she ran her hands through his hair and silenced his doubts with kisses and soft promises. She never grew tired of him either, understanding his fears instead of resenting them.

Soulmates? It had to be.

"I love you, Mike," she answered his request. "I'll always love you."

"Forever?" he croaked, hands tangled in her hair.

"Forever," her voice took on the usual teasing tone. "Which is incredibly cheesy but I am willing to put up with because I love you."

"Stop ruining my fantasies," he grumped. "Just accept my cheesy love. Pretend like you want me."

She pulled back, looking up at him with a frown.

"Don't be stupid, Mike. I'm not pretending." Her voice softened, her hand reaching up to rub the back of his neck gently. "I do want you. I'll always want you."

"Always. I like that better. Less cheesy than forever," he nodded

agreeably. “Isn’t that what Snape says about Lily in Harry Potter?”

“Snape was an asshole, Mike, don’t compare yourself to him. Our always can be way better.”

“Snape was—” he started to protest but she cut him off, grinning.

“Now who’s ruining the fantasy?”

He kissed her and quieted her, letting her know he took her words seriously even if he was joking around. She sighed and wrapped her arms around his neck, closing her eyes and giving in to him completely, her muscles relaxing. There was an unspoken trust they had built, untarnished by the years and stronger than steel, that kept them glued together. The way they took care of each other, never tiring, never getting annoyed. He couldn’t imagine wanting that with anyone but her.

Pulling back he sighed, blinking and feeling how solid and real she was in his arms.

“I love you, El.”

“I love you, Mike,” she slid back. “Now come on. I’m hungry. If you love me you’ll feed me.”

“We’re probably going out and my parents are probably going to insist on paying but if you want I can feed you each bit when we get there.”

“You’re so fucking literal.”

“You’re so fucking cute,” he shot back.

“Ew, gross.”

He picked her up, her small frame light enough, and slung her over his shoulder as she squealed in protest, her hands fisting into his shirt as he took off running. She laughed, gripping onto him as she bounced, and he knew they had to look ridiculous, bouncing across the field, following his parents.

He set her down when they got to the archway, standing in the shadow that it made and letting her readjust herself.

“Why did you pick me up?”

“I dunno. I just wanted to.”

“You could have at least given me a piggyback ride, that would have felt better,” she scolded, brushing at her skirt.

“Sorry, El. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Oh, I’m not mad, I just wanted a warning,” her hand was in his and he looked down at it. “I like to be only slightly disheveled at all times and you took it a little bit past that.”

“Slightly disheveled? That would be a good name for a band.”

“What?”

Up ahead there was a shout.

“Mike! El! Are you two coming? Mom and Dad are already in the car,” Holly crossed her arms and gave them a semi-grossed out look. “Stop making out so we can get lunch.”

“We weren’t—” Mike started to protest but stopped.

He was twenty-five year old man. His teenage sister was not about to make him feel ashamed for wanting to make out with his fiancée for five minutes.

Grabbing El’s face he kissed her so passionately he felt her shudder and give in, not embarrassed in the slightest either. It started as him trying to prove a point but as she softened against him and let her lips opened slightly it turned into something more. Her hand cupped his cheek, the ring on her finger cool against his cheekbone.

*I love her. I’m going to marry her.*

Every molecule in his body pulsed at their closeness and he let the love that hummed inside of him pour out as he kissed her, stealing

her breath. She answered him silently, her emotions obvious as she tightened her grip, her eyes closed, her heart beating against his chest. It was like something was bursting out of them, filling the air around them as the reality of the ring on her finger and the promise of the future burned hotly, their lips saying silently how much they meant to each other.

It was perfect.

“Ew, gross!”

Holly’s exclamation brought them back and they pulled apart with a gasp. El’s hand brushed against his pocket, crinkling something paper-y within and as she turned to give Holly an apologetic look he suddenly remembered the letter.

“El!”

He whipped it out, trying to straighten the crumpled edges, cursing himself for being so forgetful in the first place. Whatever this was it was important and he should have handed it to her the second he saw her instead of kissing her and forgetting.

“What?”

Her eyes were wide, face alarmed, and he took a breath to calm down.

“Sorry, it’s not anything bad, I just forgot and I think it’s important...” he handed it to her and she took it, giving it a curious once-over. “Your sister stopped by this morning. Roman. She said the case against... against Brenner was over. That’s your settlement.”

He bit his lip, swallowing the question he wanted to ask and instead watched her. She was surprised, eyes slick with guilt, but quickly slid her finger under the flap and ripped it open neatly. Her hands were shaking, he realized, as she slid out the simple piece of paper. A check fell out as she tugged, fluttering to the ground and he bent down to pick it up as she read the letter.

Glancing at it he suddenly felt dizzy. He blinked, sure he had misread it, but stared at the six zeros that looped merrily across the page. Six



zeros and a two ones. Eleven million. Eleven million dollars.

He was dazed, looking back at her and seeing the tears that were spilling onto the piece of paper she held in her shaking hands. Reaching out he steadied her hands with his own, taking a deep breath.

“El, what does—”

“He can’t adopt anymore, Mike. He can’t hurt anyone,” she whispered and he could feel her trembling with he realized was relief. “He c-can’t h-hur—”

Her voice broke and the letter was crushed between them as she fell into his arms and cried against his chest, her fears put to rest with a single piece of paper. It wasn’t his battle and he hadn’t even known about it but suddenly he realized why. She shared almost everything with him, told him all her fears. But this wasn’t just her fear, it had been her and her sister’s and she hadn’t faced it alone.

But she hadn’t wanted him to face it and while he guessed it was because she didn’t want him getting upset he was still a bit hurt. He sighed, remembering how he promised he would forgive her no matter, and silently unclenched the fist of anger that was living inside of him. With a breath he let the pop of anger and hurt fall away and focused instead on what was in front of him.

“El,” he kissed the top of her head. “I’m so proud of you. You beat him, El. He can’t hurt anymore kids like he did you. You’re safe.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” she whispered. “I wanted to but you always get so mad when I talk about him. I thought it would be better.”

“Did Roman... did she help you?”

“She did the heavy work. But I wasn’t alone. You took care of me even when you didn’t know, and she helped too.” A shuddery exhale. “I knew I could do it. I had to. But I’m sorry.”

“You’re forgiven, don’t worry but, um...”

He loosened his grip on her and held up the small rectangle in his hand, showing her the check that she hadn't seen.

"You have a eleven million dollars. The irony is fantastic but—"

"What?! *Million*?!" Her eyes were suddenly huge.

"Eleven million, actually."

"I-I thought I'd get a few thousand, maybe a hundred thousand at most but—"

"He's a rich son of a bitch, huh?"

"What should we do with it?" she breathed. "We could be like Dustin and Max and buy a house. Or wait—" Her mouth dropped open in realization. "We can afford it now, Mike. Both of our master's programs. We can go wherever we want."

She had taken it from him and held it reverently, staring at the check like it was a kitten instead of piece of paper. Her eyes suddenly filled with tears again and he reached to comfort her again but she shook her head.

"No, I'm not—I'm not *sad*, Mike," a watery grin stretched across her face as she sobbed. "I'm just so fucking *happy* and I c-can't believe—"

"I can't believe it either," he admitted.

"W-We're going to be okay. I mean, like, financially—"

"Were you worried?" His brow creased.

She fiddled with the check and bit her lip before reluctantly nodding. He felt another stab of insecurity. She hadn't told him that.

"Why? I make enough—"

"I know you do, Mike, but I didn't want to have to depend on you for the rest of my life to pay all of my school bills and for my clothes and... *everything* . Like *he* did. I didn't want that."

“I don’t mind—”

“I know you don’t but I do and it was just... I felt guilty,” she confessed.

He supposed he could be upset but he understood what she was saying. It wasn’t something against him, it was something inside of her. He sighed.

“You have always been a strong independent woman,” he shook his head. “I’m not surprised you felt that way but I wish you didn’t.”

“I don’t need to now. I can pay off my loans and afford more school... we could get a new car!”

“You don’t like Gandalf?” he pouted.

“I love Gandalf but not having to share would be nice, admit it.”

“Yeah... we could get something white. Name it Saruman.”

“Or Gandalf the White,” she snorted. “There are technically two Gandalfs...”

“That would be confusing!”

They started to argue but were interrupted by his phone ringing and he blinked at the déjà vu feeling before pulling it out of his pocket. It wasn’t Max but his mom and he realized it was his mother. Holly, who had been standing a few feet away during the conversation, had vanished.

“Hey, Mom,” he answered. “Sorry we were—”

“We went to Olive Garden and we’re waiting for a seat. Holly said you two were talking about something serious?”

“Yeah, kind of, um, I’ll explain when we get there. Sorry to take so long.”

“It’s fine, Michael, you just proposed. I’m sure you’re still a bit... euphoric.”

His mom was on target for once and he swallowed, glancing at El.

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“Just don’t take too long, I would like to spend some time with your fiancée and start that wedding planning. We have a lot to discuss.”

“Okay, fine, we’ll be there soon.”

“Alright, sweetie, see you.”

“Bye.”

He hung up and slid his phone back into his pocket, already feeling a bit tired from the onslaught of questions he knew faced them both at Olive Garden.

“We should go, huh?” she asked, head tilted.

“Yeah...” he sighed, still trying to make sense of everything that had just happened.

He’d woken up to such a normal day, with her in his arms like usual. And suddenly the muddled future they had been trudging toward uncertainly was a shining beacon. There was nothing holding them back now.

“Can we use some of your eleven million to go on a sweet honeymoon? I want to go to Hogwarts. Universal Studios.”

“Yes,” she said solidly as they left the archway and headed to the parking lot. “I want butterbeer. And a wand.”

“Remember when you didn’t like Harry Potter?”

“We don’t talk about that,” she sniffed. “As far as I’m concerned they’re some of the best books ever written and I would personally build a shrine for Sirius and Remus if we had room at home.”

“Maybe at the next house.”

“I like that.”

They walked silently, hand in hand to the car and she took off her robe and cap and stashed it in the back, sliding into the passenger side and plugging in her phone. She was always in charge of music but he liked almost everything she played, their tastes similar enough. A familiar 80s tune filled the car and he glanced over as he shifted into reverse.

*"The wind blows hard against this mountain side,*

*Across the sea into my soul*

*It reaches into where I cannot hide,*

*Setting my feet upon the road"*

"Oof, when did this one come out?" he asked.

"1985. It's catchy."

"No, I like it."

*"My heart is old, it holds my memories,*

*My body burns a gemlike flame*

*Somewhere between the soul and soft machine,*

*Is where I find myself again"*

"I feel like this is weirdly relevant right now," he glanced again as he took a left turn and she smiled mischievously.

"That's cause it is."

*"Kyrie eleison, down the road that I must travel*

*Kyrie eleison, through the darkness of the night"*

"Is that another language?"

"Latin," she nodded.

*"Kyrie eleison, where I'm going will you follow*

*Kyrie eleison, on a highway in the light*

“It means, ‘God have mercy’ or something, like monks used to sing it in latin back before music actually sounded good. I just like how the music sounds,” she said.

“The chorus is killer even in latin.”

The car filled with the music and he hummed along as she sang, since he wasn’t familiar enough with the words. By the time they pulled into the bustling parking lot of Olive Garden he felt excited again.

She got out of the car and he leapt out, running around the side of the car and pinning her against to the door to kiss her, pulling back with a huge smile. Her eyes were widened in surprise and she gave him a curious stare.

“What?”

“I’m excited.”

“I didn’t know you liked Italian food that much.”

“No, not because—”

“I know, Mike,” she grinned. “I understand. I’m excited too.”

“About—”

“Tomorrow. Or whatever, ugh, you know I’m shit at words,” she winced. “But I get it, that weird feeling in your stomach that’s happy? Like tingly, I dunno, um, I’m excited too. For whatever happens next. With you.”

“That’s... did you read my mind?” his eyebrow quirked.

“Nah, I just know your face by now. It was obvious.”

“You know me way too well... but I definitely am okay with it.”

She grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him down, not kiss but to just press her forehead against him, leaning into him and

breathing. Appreciating everything, he supposed, and he gripped her tighter, nuzzling her temple lightly with his nose.

It was quiet and soft, the excitement that was quivering their insides, but it was shared and she let out a shuddery breath, warm on his neck, as his fingers ran up and down her back.

They talked a lot. Bantered. Gave each other hell and then snuggled and kissed and loved each other. But there didn't need to be words this time. This time was different and somehow... new.

The fear was gone, all of it, every stress soothed and now there was nothing pure excitement and joy for what would come next. A wedding for sure. New jobs, new city, new house, new people. But with each other. Always.

With a content sigh he opened his eyes, seeing how she still had her eyes closed, her face serene and calm as her hand slid up the back of his neck and stroked his shaggy hair there, her touch gentle. Her breath was warm on his neck and he closed his eyes again and breathed her in, letting the moment settle into his mind as a memory he promised to never forget.

A breath of peace. A moment of calm before their lives hurricaned again.

"I love you," he mumbled against her temple.

"Good. I love you too," she whispered back.

"Ready to eat?"

"I'm fucking starving."

He let the moment end. There was no doubt in his mind that there would be more just like it, somewhere in the near future. That no matter what happened they would find those peaceful moments together and just rest and breathe them in. Whether it was in while lying tangled together or standing in an Olive Garden parking lot, he knew he would always have those moments.

"One more," he insisted.

“Mmmm, fine.”

Their lips met and he felt her smiling, felt her hands tighten just a bit on his shoulders, felt her sigh against him and give in, like she always did. His heart sped up, his fingers gripping her wrists and feeling the familiar lines and ridges there. She was perfect to him, no amount of scars or mistakes able to take that feeling from him. Nothing would, he was certain of that.

Pulling back he looked down at met her hazel-brown eyes, knowing he was going to get to see them for the rest of his life. She gave him a sly smile and then stood on her toes and kissed him again, even though he'd only expected the one. There was no complaint, as he welcomed her back to his arms.

This time he was the one who smiled.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

to everyone (including you new people after season 2) i just wanted to say thank you so much! this story has been such an emotional journey for me and seeing people tell me that they've learned more about anxiety and depression or that they relate to this and it's maybe helped them?

that's why i write, because i have to and because i want to make you guys feel. mileven means a lot to me and i try to do them justice but it's more than that and i just... i'm so grateful i'm crying again ugh fuck.

i'm mostly going to be writing one-shots until i get all of the season 2 feelings out of me but i had another AU sitting around (hint: fairytale) and i have some ideas for a headcanon of what will happen in season three. i'm still not sure what will happen with Miles from Nowhere but i might revisit that too.

i need to graduate from college first tho lol and my ass is getting kicked so i can't rush anything but



there will be one-shots. the one-shots are coming. if you guys ever have requests or ideas or just need to talk drop me a comment! i'm inactive on tumblr but i do have an instagram that's my personal so it's private but i'll probably accept your follow or dm cause i love all you so much. <3

and remember, you might not have a mike to your el but you're never alone. you're all strong, beautiful people and i love you all so dearly. you have my heart.

-graci